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The provocation in art as a political and social act with a focus on Iran

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Abstract

In this master thesis I am investigating the provocation in art in the Western and Middle Eastern art scene with a special focus on Iran. I am trying to find out in as far provocation in art is only as obvious and scandalous as more political freedom one artist has or if there are different motifs for artists to be more or less provocative in order to engage social change. Artists who are working with provocation in their art have to decide according to the place they want to display their art work how obvious and scandalous it should be in order to gain a greater effect and spread their social and political message.

Furthermore I try to highlight the obscure line between scandalous and hideous provocation and the different habits, beliefs and political situations that come with them. Therefore I showcase the different provocation formats with its history, the question about morality and especially the expression of different provocation formats regarding to their place of display and the society that has to deal with them. The thesis should display the challenges that artists have to deal with as well as their different effects on society in order to engage social and political change.

Furthermore I want to have a closer look to the relationship between the provocation of Iranian artists inside and outside of their country. It is certain that the Iranian artists are having more freedom to be more provocative and political with their art work in Europe due to the strictly conservative restrictions in Iran. Consequently it follows that the expression of provocation in Iran is more hideous and outside of Iran more outstanding even though the hideous provocation could always lead to a scandal as soon as it would be detected by the conservative politicians. Nevertheless is it questionable if the scandalous provocation in the Western society or if the hideous provocation in the Iranian society has more effect in order to engage social change.

In addition to my thesis my statements about the Iranian art scene and society will be supported by interviews with Iranian artists.

Key Words: provocation in art, political art, provocative artists, Iranian artists, Iranian contemporary art, provocative art in Iran

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Jasmin Böhm

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1. Introduction

Throughout the whole history of art, the relationship between art and politics has always been an important issue as they have tried to influence each other in certain ways. Art reflects the changing social conditions and politics tries to influence the artist's tendency in their artwork or uses artworks as propaganda. Artists have the ability to promote critical reflection and co-responsibility, they can make people see things in a different way and change their way of life. The observer gets involved and as a result of that, a dialogue between art and its observer emerges. This dialogue that is created is based on one's own understanding of morality and taste, and the emotions one feels while interacting with the artwork. It is therefore not surprising that provocation is an integral part of the history of art. Be it the nudity of the female body, Picasso's, Pasolini's, Warhol's or Beuy's work, provocation in any kind of form is a never-ending discourse in art and has led to many new opinions and artistic directions. Especially in Modern and Contemporary Art one can find many provocative works where artists try to break social taboos in different ways. Social taboos vary according to their place of origin, and therefore what is considered provocative is relative to the place and the value system of the politics and society where the artwork is displayed.

In this master thesis I am investigating the provocation in art with a special focus on Iran. I am trying to find out if provocation in art is only as obvious and scandalous as more political freedom an artist has and if there are different ways for artists to be provocative in order to initiate social change. Artists who are working with provocation in their art have to decide according to the place they want to display their artworks how obvious and scandalous it should be in order to gain a greater effect and spread their social and political message. In the *Western world*¹ most of the provocative artworks trigger big debates about the

¹ When I use the term *Western* I relate mostly to North America, Australia, New Zealand and Europe even though the politics and cultures are very different in each place and therefore the provocation as well. Naturally the provocation in art is for instance different from country to country. On this account I chose to analyse and discuss several provocations in art where the artists are living in a democratic country that functions as one in the case that they can use their right of free expression and do not have to fear strict consequences for their works. Furthermore

relationship of art and morality and what art is allowed to and not allowed to do. The artists are trying to get the attention of the society for their message, the more provocative a work of art is, the more attention the artists get and therefore the chance of dissemination of their message rises. Nevertheless most of the time the discussions about the moral issues of a work are much bigger than the dispute about the actual illustrated problem itself. Moreover a lot of artists play with provocation which shocks people and makes them question what art is allowed to do and if the artists should have absolute freedom in their work or not. Among others well-known examples of this phenomenon are works of Damien Hirst, Martin Kippenberger or Santiago Serra. However, it is important to also have the current rising number of artists and therefore the higher competition between them in mind. Nowadays the provocation in art not only seems to be a medium that indicates social political problems which shocks people into awareness and reflection, but also a way to compete against a big crowd of artists and to stand out among them. In the Western world's art field there are in many countries almost no taboos existing anymore, consequently it is harder for the artists to be more provocative than their colleagues. Nevertheless each artist has to be careful that not the scandal itself gets in the main focus of attention, but rather the message behind the artwork that was supposed to initiate the social change. Therefore I want to discover if the more hidden provocation form could be more effective since people might get influenced in a more intellectual way, sometimes without even being conscious about it.

In comparison, I discuss the provocation in Iran, an Islamic Republic, where the religious leaders impose restrictions on the artists so that their freedom is impaired. The consequences of being too provocative and too political are very

I evaluate how they use the tool of provocation under this specific circumstances. However each of the examples have different political systems and therefore different starting points of their provocative artwork. Nevertheless, it is not my aim of the thesis to elucidate each of these places and their differences since this could be a whole work for itself. The term *Western* is therefore secondary and only a way to name the various examples of provocation in art where the artists can use their right of expression without the fear of great consequences. I am aware that there are certain countries for instance in Europe that may be considered as *Western countries* but the artists do not have their full freedom of artistic expression. For this reason, the term *Western countries* should be read with caution. Moreover I decided to focus on Iran, in order to demonstrate the provocation in art in a country where the artists do not have their freedom of expression and where many of them are either in prison or in exile. This makes the whole analysis of provocation in art even more complex and interesting.

high for the artists, as I exemplified by the fact that many Iranian artists are already currently in prison or exile. It is exactly this interface of being provocative in order to induce a social and political change but in the same time the fear of strict consequences from the government, what makes the analysis of provocation in art even more complex and Iran as a country so highly interesting for me.

Furthermore at the second part of my thesis I want to have a closer look at the relationship between the provocation by Iranian artists inside and outside of their country. It is certain that the Iranian artists are having more freedom to be more provocative and political with their artwork in the Western society. Therefore the expression of provocation inside Iran is more disguised and outside of Iran more obvious, even though the disguised provocation could always lead to a scandal as soon as it would be detected by the conservative politicians. Nonetheless is it questionable if the scandalous provocation in the Western society or if the disguised provocation in the Iranian society has more effect in order to initiate social change.

In summary, the aim of the master thesis is to highlight the different provocation formats in art with their motives, social background and effects. At the beginning of my work I will start with an investigation about the definition of provocation in order to define how I understand the concept of provocation in art before everything else and therefore avoid wrong interpretations by my readers in the course of the thesis. In the third chapter I am then examining the role of provocation in the field of art. Here, I will display the relationship between politics and art as well as the history of provocation in art. Afterwards I will have a closer look at the question about morality in relation to provocation in art and lastly study the effects. To illustrate, I use mainly specific examples of artists and their artwork to deal with the subject as profoundly as possible. While talking about the effects, I am on one hand analysing them regarding the provocation in art in the museum and gallery venues and on the other hand outside of the museum and gallery venues, since I believe that the effects might change according to the place where artworks are displayed. In chapter 4 I will highlight the expression of provocation in the Iranian art scene. Before doing so, I will start with a brief introduction of the

social and political history and situation of Iran as well as of the current contemporary art scene. Following up on this, I am investigating the expression of provocation in art by Iranian artists in Iran itself and afterwards by Iranian artists outside of Iran in the Western society. In support of my arguments, I will in this context cite interviews I had with Iranian artists working inside and outside of Iran, which can help to improve the understanding of their motives, goals and difficulties.

I want to examine the obscure line between scandalous and hideous provocation according to different political systems and the different beliefs, restrictions and consequences that come with them. My work tries to showcase the different provocation formats with their history, the question about morality and especially the expression of different provocation formats regarding to their place of display and the society that has to deal with them. It should highlight the differences and challenges that artists encounter as well as their effects on society in order to initiate a social and political change. I believe it is a highly sensitive issue and challenge for artists to be provocative in their art in a political way. It is the great task of each artist to try and find the right way to use the method in an intellectual and intelligent way in order to spread their message to the right place and the right people.

2. Provocation

According to the Oxford dictionary, provocation is an “action or speech that makes someone angry, especially deliberately” (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). The Cambridge dictionary calls this action or statement as “intended to make someone angry” (Dictionary Cambridge). The origin of the word comes from the Latin word *prōvocātiō* and means: “A calling out, summoning, challenging” (Latinlexicon, n.d.). The Latin word *prōvocātor* is translated as “challenger (to the fight)” (Das Wortauskunftssystem zur deutschen Sprache in Geschichte und Gegenwart) while the French meaning of *provocateur* is: “One who causes conflict or violent reactions” (Cordial, n.d.), or: “One who causes troubles in a

specific interest” (Cordial, n.d.). What is important to highlight concerning these definitions, is the fact that according to them a provocation always has the *intention* to make someone angry or challenge someone, it does not happen coincidentally. Furthermore, a provocateur is provoking a reaction or conflict in a specific interest. I do not believe that the reaction has to be violent but it has to be offensive to a certain degree in order to be perceived as provocative.

Rainer Paris defines provocation in his work *Stachel und Speer. Machtstudien* from 1998 as a “deliberately induced surprising break of the norm which is to draw the other into an open conflict and to induce a reaction that especially in the eyes of others morally discredits and exposes him” (Paris, 1998, p. 58). Regarding provocation in art, I do agree with the first part of Rainer Paris’ definition but I do not necessarily agree that the reaction has to morally discredit and expose the observer of an artwork in the eyes of others. I will give a deeper explanation of my view about this statement at the end of the chapter. For the moment, I want to begin with elaborating the first part of Rainer Paris’ definition of provocation. In order to provoke someone, rules and norms have to be broken. The provocateur does not act in a way that is expected from him by the majority of people who act according to spoken or unspoken rules. By not respecting these rules and norms, the provocation involves other people to question the provocation’s right of existence but also the rules and norms themselves. Contrariwise a breach of norm does not necessarily have to be a provocation, only if the provocateur aims to break the rules or norms on purpose one can speak of it. Therefore a provocation is always intentional and does not happen accidentally. Furthermore the provocation needs to be noticed by another person and demands its attention, otherwise the provocateur is breaking norms without provoking anyone with his action. In terms of provocation in art, the artist breaking norms in his own studio without displaying the artwork for others to be seen, does not make him a provocateur yet. Only the interaction between people and his provocative artwork and especially them considering the artwork as a provocation makes him a provocateur. Therefore the question if a provocation is successful or not depends only on the reaction of the other. This reaction has to show that the other person is shocked, angry, embarrassed, and guilty or feels any other

negative feeling that shows the success of the provocation. If the reaction is positive and the other one feels amusement or joy, the provocation did not work as a provocation per se or at least as a provocation towards this person.

With intentionally breaking the norm, the artist firstly charges guilt to himself, but then transfers the guilt to another one: "Provocations are a technique of self-stigmatization for the purpose of counter-stigmatization" (Paris, 1998, p. 59). First the artist gets blamed by the observers for breaking the norm, then right afterwards the blame gets transferred to the observers of the artwork. They will then free the artist of the blame for breaking the norms and instead see a meaning in his breach of norm and begin to charge themselves with blame.

However, if the provocation is directed to the public, it is a different matter, since then it can be perceived as a provocation against a third party with which the observer does not feel associated. This is the part of Rainer Paris' definition that I have to disagree with regarding provocation in art which is mostly related to provocation in public and with a large amount of people. Rainer Paris claims that the provocation induces a "reaction that especially in the eyes of others morally discredits and exposes" the provoked person (Paris, 1998, p. 58). Yet in terms of provocation in art, where the provocation is mostly related to the public, the audience reacts differently to the provocation. Since in this case the provocation does not have to be a one to one provocative act where the opponent gets attacked but can rather be a provocation that only highlights an existent problem in society. If the audience agrees with the provocateur's attack, they take away his guilt and transfer it to a third party who they consider as the one to be blamed for the problem. Even if the observers are not directly provoked by the artwork, they are still able to identify the provocation and therefore it can also be considered as successful. In these provocation formats, the audience can be split in four groups. First, they might feel provoked and take the guilt, second they do not feel provoked but understand the point of the provocation and transfer the guilt to the ones they consider as the one being blamed, third they do not agree with the provocateur and blame him for breaching the norm or lastly they do not consider the whole act as a provocation because it was executed too lightly, too complex, repeated or not surprisingly enough. Therefore the provocateur

constantly moves on a fine line of being too provocative and making the audience rise against him or highlighting a conflict with his provocation and transferring the blame either to the audience itself or let them transfer it to a third party. A provocation in public always increases the complexity of the provocation, therefore provocations in art, which are mostly in public, can be considered as a highly complex act of transferring the blame from one party to another.

Regarding my work, I am talking exclusively about provocation in art. Provocation has always been part of art, especially in Modern Art, Futurism, Happenings, Performances or Fluxus, the provocation was mostly an integral part of the artwork. Nevertheless, each artist uses provocation in a different way. It can for instance be very obvious, closely connected to scandalous art and gain a lot of attention, or on the other hand be only obvious to certain communities or upon prolonged or multiple inspections. Artists have to be aware of the risk of drawing too much attention to their work and themselves as artists instead of the problem they try to highlight through their artwork (Benkel, 2015). The reason for provocative art seems always linked to negative social and political events that artists try to change with calling attention to it. The space as well as the strategy to do so vary from artist to artist, even though they all share the same goals: Gaining awareness, engaging public participation and inducing a social political change. In order to analyse the different provocation forms I will use different examples from various parts of the world, with different cultures and norms, and therefore different consequences for the provocateur. It is important to adjust the provocation to the place and its specific norms and rules. As far as the norms and rules vary from one place to another, the provocation is perceived differently as well.

However, not in every place applies the principle that the stronger a provocation is perceived, the more successful it is, it could also be exactly the other way round. A provocation can be very lightly provocative, not even considered as a provocation by the majority of people but it can still have a slightly hidden provocative critique that only provokes on an unconscious level or in an aesthetic way. According to the author Oliver Ruf, art is provocative when it uses the “breaking-up of seemingly established aesthetic boundaries and its overcoming

or decomposing to be a crisis for the aesthetic discourse” (Ruf, 2012, p. 26). This fact outlines an understanding of aesthetic provocation, which presents radicalism as an aesthetically accomplished and effected program (Ruf, 2012). Hence to the German author Hugo Ball the aesthetic of the provocation is also a result of an experience of negativity beyond the aesthetic discourse; it is closely connected with the claim for a validity not only of a new art and literature, but also of the new critique, or, more precisely, of a new journalism, which actually intervenes in society to make a change (Ruf, 2012).

Therefore the success of a provocation in art cannot be measured according to its obvious successfulness of the provocation per se but rather to the long term effect and change in its specific place and society. Moreover it seems that there are two different forms when we are talking about provocation in art, one is provocative on an obvious level with its message and the other one is provocative on an aesthetic level that overcomes the given aesthetic boundaries.

In this context Walther Benjamin’s lecture *The Author as Producer* at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism from 1934 needs to be mentioned. Walther Benjamin claimed that: “Political commitment functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind and not as a producer“ (Benjamin, 1998, p. 91). He demanded from the revolutionary intellectual to appear as a traitor to his class of origin. The more precisely he understands his own position within the production process, the less it will occur him to pass himself off as a „man of mind“, which has to disappear in the fascism context. It should rather be a fight between capitalism and the proletariat (Benjamin, 1998). With regard to art this means that art should not be instrumentalized in favour of politics. In the context of provocation, the artists have to first understand their position within the society as artists and the forms of producing art. Only afterwards they can try to gain awareness for ongoing social and political problems and induce a change within society. Nevertheless they have to act with their provocations as traitors to their own class of origin and be fully in solidarity with the proletariat.

In the course of my work, I will further intensify these thoughts and examine the provocation with respect to its various venues, their associated cultures and

politics and furthermore highlight the differences and barriers the artists have to deal with.

3. Provocation in art

Throughout the whole history politics and art have always tried to influence each other in certain ways, for instance art by reflecting the current social conditions in its work and politics by trying to influence the art's tendency or using it as propaganda. In this chapter I am going to precisely analyse the influence between art and politics throughout the history of art, mention different positions of art historians and artists about political art and beside also study the development and change of the interface of art and politics through history. Thereinafter I elucidate the provocation in art by referring to well-known examples.

Provocation in art always involves the observer and as a result of that, a dialogue between art and its observer emerges. This created dialogue is based on one's own understanding of morality, aesthetics and taste as well as the emotions one feels while interacting with the artwork which is also closely connected to his own social and political position. In order to gain a better understanding of the morality issue regarding provocation in art, I will furthermore give a few examples of cases where the debate about the provocation was exceedingly high. At the end of the chapter I will then study the effects of the provocative artworks and try to find differences in artworks that were presented within and without the museum and gallery venues.²

² The examples given in this chapter all belong to my definition of *Western art* (see page 1) but do not have a meaning in their order or from a geographical point of view. They should rather be seen as examples to illustrate the various well-known provocations in art.

3.1 The influence between art and politics

When analysing the provocation in art it is firstly necessary to see the reciprocal influence between art and politics since all provocative artworks have also a social political message and therefore an important connection to political art. However, there is still a difference between the two art disciplines. For a better understanding, I am firstly going to start with an investigation about the influence between art and politics. Certainly it is impossible to mention all political artworks and art styles during the history of art in only one chapter of my work, therefore this chapter should rather be understood as an art historical outline of the relationship of politics and art.

Art and politics have in common that they both act under the conditions of the public (Engelniederhammer, 1995). On the one hand they need to communicate with the public and on the other hand they are equally dependent on the public's opinion (Engelniederhammer, 1995). However, nowadays the interface between art and politics is mostly found in the cultural politic field, which deals among others with issues of state art censorship, questions about political monuments, memorial sites or the political culture of a nation. Therefore the type of the political system in a country can determine the preconditions and objectives of artists and their art (Engelniederhammer, 1995). This means that it is possible to draw conclusions through art about the type of the political system of a country, and in turn, that the type of political system determines whether the artist is allowed to enjoy artistic freedom or instead censorship and suppression of his art (Engelniederhammer, 1995).

Farther back in the history of art when the artists were dependent on the church and nobility, as it was their only source of income, there could be no question of truly artistic freedom. In the Classic Art, from the Romanic until the Rococo, biblical stories and ruler portraits were very common. For instance Gothic Art was very important for the reason that many people could not read and therefore only learned about the biblical stories through the paintings by artists. Since art has the opportunity to display the political system, they can use art specifically to represent certain rule principles, the state in general or individual state organs

(Engelniederhammer, 1995). Especially in ruler's portraits during the renaissance, it was important to be able to make statements about the political program of the portrayed ruler. Thus, he must first of all be recognizable, furthermore also the pose, the facial expression, the clothes, the used colour and much more artistic signs can be interpreted as a symbol of power (Tauber, 2009). In the case of François I^{er} for instance, his portraits were always characterized by his ironic superiority and his amused smile, which signalled his sovereign and self-satisfaction (Tauber, 2009). One artist who portrayed him several times was François Clouet who is well-known for his portraits of the French ruler family. He tried to present the king only with hidden signs of authority such as the king's gaze or the royal colours of red, golden yellow, white and black and less by the obvious signs like his posture or him being much taller (Tauber, 2009). His portrayals illustrated him as sovereign, intelligent and self-satisfied.



Image 1: Clouet, Paris: Franz I. König von Frankreich, 1525.

The way the king was portrayed on the portrait was immensely important since it was the only way he was able to demonstrate his personality, his politics and power other than with words.

In her book *Kunst und Politik der Farbe. Gainsboroughs Portraitmalerei* from 1999, Bettina Gockel shows that the "natural colouring" of the English painter Gainsborough from the 18th century, which was highly acclaimed by contemporaries, had a political significance in the context of the art theory, the aesthetics, the perception theories and the natural sciences of the English Enlightenment (Gockel, 1999). The well-known rivalry between the two painter Reynolds and Gainsborough, who were both former founders of the Royal Academy, was not just for the entertainment of the public but rather about a cultural-political reaction to a bourgeois, plural-valuing society and its values that had begun to change (Gockel, 1999). The perceptual theories of the 18th century show the socio-political impetus of the dispute between the Academy on the one side and the anti-academic movement, which formed across media from painters, theatre people and musicians on the other side (Gockel, 1999). Hence Gainsborough was accused of painting only for the eye (Gockel, 1999). As an artist who alone sought to satisfy the lust of the uneducated, he seemed to reveal the established aesthetic and social values (Gockel, 1999). Reynolds resisted the fact that "the vulgar," went to the academy exhibitions (Gockel, 1999). According to Bettina Gockel, Gainsborough entered with his art style into the new patterns of perception of a bourgeois public and contributed to their education (Gockel, 1999). Aesthetic categories and education of academic art as means of controlling a scholarly consideration of art were juxtaposed with a subjective and naturally declared process of cognition and perception (Gockel, 1999).

Another example of state presentation in art is in particular architecture which serves as a much used medium (Engelniederhammer, 1995). In a totalitarian system, art is moreover instrumentalized for the enforcement or glorification of a political system (Engelniederhammer, 1995). In these cases, there is only one single state conception of art that must be respected by all artists, otherwise they are threatened with opposition and dissidence (Engelniederhammer, 1995). During our history and even today in some countries, political artworks are still

being destroyed and artists still targeted by members of authority. Until the French Revolution, it was customary that after the haphazard destruction of paintings, sculptures and other works of art during a war, a second state-organized processing would follow (Grasskamp, 1982). Once the opponent had been articulated in any of these artworks in any way, they were destroyed or sold abroad. In the French Revolution, however, a new way of perceiving works of art was enacted that remains valid until today (Grasskamp, 1982). Thus, works of art expropriated from the nobility and the church, were to be preserved and exhibited even if the works showed symbols and worldviews of the defeated class (Grasskamp, 1982). This was done according to the historical interest and the artistic quality of the works (Grasskamp, 1982). The paradoxical political decision to no longer evaluate works of art according to their political origin and statement was therefore a consequence of the Enlightenment (Grasskamp, 1982). Nevertheless, since the French Revolution, there has been one exception in which the destructive factor has been ignored, namely during the cultural politics of the National Socialists (Grasskamp, 1982).

Under the power of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists artworks were again being destroyed, banned or sold if they had any political meaning that did not fit to the German ideology of the time (Segal, 2016).³ In 1934, after Hitler was appointed Chancellor, the *Reichskulturkammer* was founded, a cabinet especially only for the arts (Haase, 2002). Joseph Goebbels gave a speech in the same year in which he announced that in the future only those who are affiliated to one of the chambers of the *Reichskulturkammer* can participate in the German cultural heritage (Haase, 2002).

The cultural politics of the National Socialist even went so far that Hitler planned a specially created art museum in Linz in which he wanted to mainly exhibit German artists and under no circumstances "degenerate art" (Haase, 2002). However, the term "degenerate" is not an invention of the National Socialists, but emerged as early as the end of the 18th century as a designation of a style that

³ In this context it has to be mentioned that Adolf Hitler had a very close relationship to art in his youth. Thus, he had applied for the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, but was rejected because of not having enough talent. In the age of 21 he lived in Vienna for a while from the income of his paintings, mainly landscape paintings on postcards. Cp. Haase (2002) p.9.

stood in contrast to the then recognized antiquity. In the US and Switzerland were considerable reservations about Modern Art as well (Haase, 2002). The “degenerate art” was removed from museums, sold abroad or even got destroyed (Haase, 2002). Among these artworks were among others works by Max Beckmann, Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso (Haase, 2002). It is said to be that on the 20th of March in 1939 1.004 paintings and 3.825 drawings and graphics got burned in Germany (Haase, 2002). Certainly, after the end of the war, the question of what should be done with the artworks arose and most of the works acquired from 1933 onwards were given to the Allied Powers (Haase, 2002). The destroying of artworks became particularly interesting in cases such as the German painter Franz Marc, who belonged with his expressionist style to the category "degenerate art" but also died as a patriotic soldier in the First World War for the former German values (Kracht, 2007). Franz Marc was considered as a unique phenomenon because he was one of the few artists who managed to remain an established artist in Germany during the Second World War. This is mostly due to the fact that his followers always endeavoured to interpret his works in the sense of the National Socialist ideology, which he indeed shared despite of his art style (Kracht, 2007). In Russia on the other hand, Picasso received the *Stalin Prize* for his communist engagement and his commitment to world peace (Segal, 2016). The American Abstract Expressionists, presented in Europe as a symbol of freedom and openness, were mostly attacked in their own country as cultural terrorists and traitors (Segal, 2016). For this reason politicians have the power to reduce art to propaganda, however artists can also make propaganda into art again (Segal, 2016). This scenario was seen during the whole history of art, I will study a few further examples relating to provocation in art in the following chapter.

The National Socialists have shown that the possession of important works of art always implies the political and cultural power of the countries. Furthermore and that is very interesting to highlight, their behaviour proofed that art could be political even if it was deviated from the creative canon of the 19th century and not only because of its political content (Grasskamp, 1982). According to the German art critic Walter Grasskamp, by the equal treatment of artworks, which

developed formally contrary to the taste of the National Socialists as well as of the art with a political content, the art, which was originally regarded as *Art pour l'Art*, was falsely designated as the epitome of the non-political arts and is undeniably political too (Grasskamp, 1982).⁴ But even in democratic systems, art can serve as a means to demonstrate the constitutional freedom of art (Engelniederhammer, 1995). One example is here the *Documenta* in Kassel, in Germany, founded in 1955, whose purpose was to bring contemporary art closer to the post-war population and to set a democratic cosmopolitan symbol against the GDR (Engelniederhammer, 1995).

As a consequence of the student movement of the 1960s after the post-Second World War era, also the artists were widely politicized (Hacker, 1982). Almost all major art associations have taken on the subject of politics over the decade, although if according to Dieter Hacker and Berhard Standfort they have never really pursued the question of the relationship between art and society (Hacker, 1982). Instead, the phenomenon of the art of the 1970s was rather short-term and emerged as an opposite stream of cultural entertainment (Hacker, 1982). Even though the curators were capable of criticizing, the upscale entertainment in art would however still be in the foreground (Hacker, 1982). Nevertheless Dieter Hacker and Berhard Standfort like to emphasize the exhibition *Art into Society, Society into Art* at ICA London in 1974 and *Art in Political Struggle* at the *Kunstverein Hannover* in 1973 (Hacker, 1982). They both exhibited political art that had its roots in political Dadaism (Hacker, 1982). In addition, their goal had been to show that it is not true that critical exhibitions, as Harald Szeemann once said: "Except much paper have not much to offer" (Hacker, 1982, p. 6).

⁴ An anti-conventional art exists not just since the late eighteenth century, when the idea of autonomy of art came up. Kant meant by it that the artistic "genius" neither is committed to a lifelike reproduction, nor is bound to political specifications or moral standards. The artistic genius gives itself the law. The same applies to the aesthetic "taste judgment". According to Kant, this "taste judgment" is a free play of the imagination and the mind, which is neither determined by considerations of value, nor by moral considerations. Kant did not claim that art has nothing to tell us morally. What characterizes our understanding of art to this day is, above all, his idea that moral considerations are irrelevant for the aesthetic taste judgment of an artwork. The created association of autonomy and amorality of art resulted in the nineteenth century in the *L'Art pour l'Art* movement and served in many contexts as argumentation to critical or unconventional art against political attacks. Cp. Kant and Weischedel (2014), §§ 46, 47, p. 241-246.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time where politics played an immense role in the society. A generation emerged that was questioning laws, rules and actions of politicians and in the matter of art also of art institutions and art itself. Nevertheless this phenomenon could already be seen for instance in artworks from Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s. However, especially the provocative artworks and art exhibitions increased. Political art was something that could be even called “trendy” and therefore more and more artists and art institutions devoted their particular attention to the topic.

Another important issue regarding politics and art is the different treatment of men and women in the art world. Until the last century women were not even able to get any art education at all (Streletz, 1996). As nude drawing belonged to the study of painting and sculpture, which seemed immoral for women, it was feared that they could disturb and distract the male students from working (Streletz, 1996). Hence many women had to work without proper art education and even if they had great talent, their work never got any attention since it was never exhibited or sold. Even today at exhibitions like the *Documenta*, the proportion of female artists still only reaches a maximum of 15% (Streletz, 1996).⁵ Female artists are also less spattered in the media, their work is less bought and they rarely receive any art prizes (Streletz, 1996). In the case of state art promotion, men also receive 85% and women only 15% (Streletz, 1996). The fight against these injustices and other difficulties such as racism, sexism, homophobia or even warfare, is one of the numerous reasons of political and also provocative artwork. Nevertheless they still remain important and mostly unsolved issues until today.

Many countries support arts generally due to economic, social, political or ideological reasons, and therefore the writers Irfan Nihan Demirel and Osman Altintas suggest, that art should try to enlighten the community within politics by focusing on social, communal, economic and political realities (Demirel & Altintas, 2012). Artists have the ability to reach the attention of more diverse audiences than politicians can do, therefore they have the great possibility to achieve a true

⁵ However even in 2017 the numbers are not exceedingly high as women artist only reached 30.6% at the Documenta. Cp. Belouali-Dejean (2017).

impact on the society. Art can become political, depending on how it is interpreted, therefore the political meaning of art is a matter of constant discussion and reinterpretation and not always clearly to be understood. This fact can be used in a positive way by the artists, as they have more freedom to be controversial than politicians have. The politicians always have to try to choose the right words to be understood and supported by the public, whereas artists can work with different methods like provocation. It is no secret that not only political speeches but also artworks can show the artist's own political attitude. The German graphic designer and caricaturist Klaus Staeck claims in his book *Ohne Auftrag. Unterwegs in Sachen Kunst und Politik* that pictures can, as has often been proven, develop a stronger power than words (Staeck, 2000). Not least because of this, there have always been spectacular actions by *iconoclasts*. In his opinion the power of images has nowadays become a metaphor for our media age (Staeck, 2000). Also the artist, art critic and writer Hans Platschek is of the opinion that pictures are sometimes more expressive than words because they use a less conceptual language. Pictures are vivid and turn to the viewer in a more direct way (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). However according to the writer and board member of *IG Metall*, Ariane Hellinger, the real core of the history of art, the work of art itself and its analysis, is mostly unaffected by politics (Hellinger, Waldkirch, Buchner, & Batt, 2013). In this case I have to disagree with Ariane Hellinger's statement as I have shown with numerous examples that the work of art itself was highly affected by politics, especially during war.

In a conversation between the art historian Anne-Marie Kassay and Hans Platschek in the book *Die Schönheit muß auch manchmal wahr sein* from 1982, both share the opinion that every artistic work is implicitly or explicitly also political (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). Hans Platschek even goes so far as to say that every artist, even if he insists on the opposite, is political in his artwork (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). In his opinion one must differentiate between a Kandinsky or Mondrian on the one hand and Guernica on the other hand. Kandinsky and Mondrian were nonetheless aware that they were pursuing a political ambiguity with their reactionary images (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). Therefore there are works of art with hidden political implications but also those artworks whose

political content is clearly visible (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). Furthermore, Cubism, Surrealism and Dadaism arose from a general political unrest and a general societal progressiveness (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). In addition, according to Hans Platschek, there exists such an enormous number of images that the artists would have to consider denotations that have more sophisticated symbolic characters, such as Picasso's idea for peace to paint a dove (Kassay & Platschek, 1982). An artist could also paint a still life that expresses peace, but the artist has to think about which objects he takes in exactly (Kassay & Platschek, 1982).

I do not necessarily agree with the definition that every art is political as well as I do not agree that the artworks were during the history of art generally mostly unaffected by politics. On one hand I share the opinion that it is impossible to act outside of politics since our actions, beliefs and the laws that we have to deal with in our daily life are consequences of political decisions. We live in a world that is created by politics, even if we are not aware of it, our way of living is strongly affected by it. One cannot stay out of politics even though he believes so, since everyone is part of it as an individual of the collective which is called our society. Art is therefore in a highly complex manner, also part of the social and political conditions that the artists have to deal with. The choices the artists make during the production process are strongly affected by politics. It starts with the choice of the medium of work and ends with the expenditure. In this context one could come to the conclusion that everything said or produced by humankind is political. However, I see things rather differently myself, since in my opinion this point of view that every artwork is political even though the artists do not intend to be political, is too extreme. I believe it still needs to be distinguished by art that is made for the arts purpose or even wants to stay out of politics and art that has a political content or is strongly provoking with its style. Even though art critics can interpret non-political artworks in a political way regarding the style, the medium, the symbols or the colours, to label these works as political artworks should be in my opinion considered with great caution.

3.2 The history of provocation in art

In the previous chapter I studied the interface between politics and art and mentioned several examples of political art throughout the history. In this chapter, the important question to ask is, what the difference between political art and provocative art is. Is every political art automatically provocative? It is certain that every provocative art is likewise political or at least has a social political intention but whether it also is the case the other way round, I will have to elucidate with several examples of provocative art in this chapter.

To remember, my definition of provocation in art is the intentional breaking of rules, laws and norms with an artwork in order to make people feel provoked and to transfer the guilt to themselves, to the artist for breaking the rules, laws or norms or to a third party. The artist has to find the balance of being provocative but not too provocative so that he is ending up with the guilt himself. Furthermore, there are provocations in aesthetic boundaries and provocations on political events, the latter is more obvious to the public. One major difference to political art that I studied in the previous chapter, is for instance the intention of the artist of being provocative that defines the provocation and distinguishes it from political art. The clear aim of the artist to provoke with his artwork is one of the main aspects of provocative art. Provocation has in different forms always been part of art and is mostly used to gain attention in order to spread messages, mostly political ones, within the public. In the following, I am going to study a few examples of provocative art throughout the history.

Starting with two drawings of members of the Schildersbent. The Schildersbent, whose members were referred to as *Bentvueghels* (a gang of birds) was a non-confessional association of Dutch painters in Rome, founded between 1623 and 1627 (Hartje, 2004). The art historian Jakob Rosenberg claims that during the nineteenth century they would have been called Bohemians (Rosenberg & Slive, 1966). New members of the group were baptized with wine and received their Bent name from a mock priest (Rosenberg & Slive, 1966). The group was able to represent the young painters in legal matters, to give them a studio and to establish necessary contacts with clients and buyers (Hartje, 2004). In the first

half of the sixteenth century, the group comprised about thirty to forty painters, most of whom could be counted among the *Bamboccianti* (Hartje, 2004). The Schilderbent was a kind of corporation with no statutes, fixed programmes or particular leadership and included Dutch and Flemish artists (Hoogewerff, 1952). They ignored all coercion by the Academicians and had two purposes, first to create a solidarity especially when the rights of any of its members were threatened and second to help each other by nursing in the case of sickness or supporting each other in the case of conflicts with outsiders (Hoogewerff, 1952). Nevertheless soon after its founding the Schildersbent got into conflict with the Accademia of St. Luca (Hartje, 2004).

The Academy of St. Luca had been founded in 1577 as a powerful and privileged body to which all artists in Rome were to belong (Hoogewerff, 1952). Its constitution prescribed that artists in Rome are not allowed to practice their profession without having first paid their “alms” to the Academy on the festival of St. Luke (Hoogewerff, 1952). From 1624-25 onwards the *Bentvueghels* refused to pay these “alms”, but in spite of this they continued to sell their increasingly popular paintings for good payment (Hoogewerff, 1952). Therefore in 1633, during the reign of Urban VIII, the Academicians elicited a Papal Brief by which the so-called voluntary alms were replaced by a compulsory yearly levy (Hoogewerff, 1952). Since then Italian artists were to pay forty-two “baiocchi” or stivers, and foreign artists thirty-six (Hoogewerff, 1952). The *Bentvueghels* however still refused to pay the levy (Hoogewerff, 1952). The Academicians seemed powerless and could not force the Schildersbent to pay nor could they prevent them from selling their paintings, which they described as “vulgar” (Hoogewerff, 1952). Nevertheless the *Bentvueghels* even sold them to Cardinals (Hoogewerff, 1952). After the death of Urban VIII in 1644, the Academy was forced to allow the Schildersbent the right to sell small secular paintings without any previous “stima” (Hoogewerff, 1952). Even before the Schildersbent was founded, in 1620 there was a great conflict between Dutch artists in Rome and the Accademia di San Luca, which operated under papal leadership and demanded a donation of artists or art dealers in Rome (Meyere, 1991). However, the Dutch artists refused to comply with payments from 1624 (Meyere, 1991). In

addition, the Accademia had taken the right to determine what was artistically allowed and not allowed (Meyere, 1991). The works of the Schildersbent completely violated the standards of the Accademia (Meyere, 1991). Therefore, it is not surprising that the group came into conflict with the Accademia shortly after its founding because of its quest for independence (Hartje, 2004).

The first painting I am going to have a closer look at is from 1630 from the Dutch artist Pieter van Laer and called *The Bentvueghels in a Roman Tavern*.



Image 2: Van Laer, Pieter: Bentvueghels in einer römischen Kneipe, 1630.

Pieter van Laer was a Dutch painter, drawer and etcher in the 16th-17th century (Bernt, 1980). In 1625 he travelled to Italy where he became a member and eventually known as the leader of the *Bentvueghels* in Rome (Rosenberg & Slive, 1966). He was one of the first Dutch painters to integrate Italian folk and street life into his works (Bernt, 1980). The themes of his drawings also resembled the subjects of his paintings, including farmers, horses, soldiers, the Bentvueghels, street musicians, market life, fighting robbers and beggars or similar scenes (Bernt, 1980). His drawing and painting style, was named after his nickname "Bamboccio" because of his deformed body (bamboccio means awkward simpleton or puppet) (Rosenberg, Slive, & Ter Kuile, 1966) and was known as

the "Bambocciata style", which displayed a special kind of Roman street life (Blankert, 2004). Van Laer was thus the first painter to specialize in Roman street life, influencing many other artists who adopted his style and were thus also listed as *Bambocciata*. According to the art historian Jakob Rosenberg, his paintings of the poor citizens of Rome never showed any trace of bitterness or irony and therefore appeared very sympathetic (Rosenberg & Slive, 1966). When Pieter van Laer came to Rome in 1625, many Dutch artists were already living there. In the opinion of Jos de Meyere, in no other country have the connections between artists and other countries been so intense as between the Netherland and Italy (Meyere, 1991). First, large groups of pilgrims moved to Rome in the 8th century. Moreover from the 16th century, the discovery of the ancient world began and artists made a trip to Rome to study ancient and contemporary art. On the other hand, there were many people who warned against the trip, especially because of the immorality of the Romans (Meyere, 1991). In the drawing of Pieter van Laer one can see the *Bentvueghels* drinking in a tavern. Several people sit on a table or stand on benches. One draws at the wall, others smoke, drink or play games. The drawing provokes since Pieter van Laer is demonstrating what the group was known for and what the Academia was accusing them for, to be a drunk group of artists who draw vulgar, who are mocking the church and who are violating the standards of the Academia. Drawing their drinking festivities and selling them to people showed once more the independence of the group and that they indeed ignored the accuses of the Academia or even made provocatively fun about it. In the drawing, which was created around 1622/1624 by possibly Matthijs Pool after Dominicus van Wijnen, members of the *Bentvueghels* are depicted. Presumably, the act of baptism is illustrated which in the group of the *Bentvueghels* was done ironically at the reception of a new member in form of a festival dedicated to Bacchus.⁶

⁶ Bacchus refers to a nickname of Dionysus, the wine god, in Greek mythology. In the Romans, friendships were sealed in the name of Bacchus and extravagant feasts were celebrated, which they staged to welcome a new member. In the circle of the Dutch painters, Bacchus acted as patron of the arts. In the intoxication of the wine, they hoped for inspiration and creativity. Cp. Hartje (2004), p.171.



Image 3: Pool, Matthijs (possibly) after Dominicus van Wijnen: Ontvangst van een nieuw lid van de Bentvueghels, 1690-1710.

A large group of men is displayed in the drawing, some are dressed as Greek gods who seem to rule over the rest of the men. One man is in the centre of attention, he bends forward so that his back could be used as a table for wine and his trousers are pulled down. The whole act of baptism in the Schildersbent was a parody of the bacchanalia and thus of the initiation rites of antiquity, as well as a mocking of the liturgical customs of the Roman Catholic Church (Hartje, 2004). The guests were dressed in tunics and had laurel wreaths (Hartje, 2004). One of the members is disguised as Bacchus, the "god of wine", and other members act as priests (Hartje, 2004). The new member kneels venerable before the Bacchus, cynically, his back is usually used as a table (Hartje, 2004). A so-called Feldpaptist explains the statute to the newcomer and then baptizes him with wine and gives him his nickname, which should emphasize his weaknesses (Hartje, 2004). After the christening ceremony, there was a banquet, after which the community went to Santa Constanza, the alleged Bacchus temple on via Nomentana (Hartje, 2004). Once there, drinking offerings were made at the

Bacchus Tomb (Hartje, 2004). The whole festival was certainly a great provocation to the Academia as well as to the church, therefore drawings and paintings of these rituals were causing great disputes as well. The Schildersbent was finally dissolved and prohibited by a papal decree in 1720 because of certain Bacchic irregularities as their ceremonies were seen as a mockery of the sacrament of baptism (Hoogewerff, 1952).

As there were many disputes within the group which had to be cleared up in court and because of various drawings of the drinking festivities and baptism celebrations, a rather one-sided picture of the group arises, which however, does not do justice to its social significance (Meyere, 1991). The constant number of approx. 50-60 members could despite all disputes count on solidarity within the group (Meyere, 1991). They were brokered to clients and were looking for both an apartment and a studio (Meyere, 1991). Many of them also lived together in one house and spend most of their lives together in Rome (Meyere, 1991). Although the *Bentvueghels* were well-known for their drinking, their focus was definitely on their artistic skills, which is why there is an enormous number of drawings and paintings from the members that had a great influence on artists around the world. It seems that they are precisely familiar with the prejudices and therefore tried to deal with them in an ironic provocative artistic way.

When studying provocative artworks it seems like there is a close connection with political caricature. Dietrich Grünewald claims in his book *Politische Karikatur. Zwischen Journalismus und Kunst* from 2002 that political caricatures are political comments which are up-to-date, partisan, provocative, focused on one specific group, and in the best sense also journalistic (Grünewald, 2002). Siegfried Frey found out in 1999 that especially visual information have significant influence on our attitude (Grünewald, 2002). Therefore it is certain that artists who want to induce a change use caricature as their medium for producing a thought impulse on the viewer (Grünewald, 2002). The image is not reality, nor its reflection but a subjective artefact that illustrates something that we are able to associate with our experiences and requires us for a judgmental reflection (Grünewald, 2002). The purpose of the caricature is to provoke the positive image that the object of the caricature has and oppose a negative caricature that irritates the recipient

and causes him to check his assumed view (Grünewald, 2002). The satirical criticism can evoke a smile but also cynical hate (Grünewald, 2002). On top of that the caricature must bear features that the reader can recognize and interpret, if he cannot connect it with any contextual experience the image remains incomprehensible and thus has no effect (Grünewald, 2002). In the end each caricature is an offer which requires active and productive appropriation by the viewer in order to work (Grünewald, 2002). In my opinion provocative artwork and caricature have a lot in common since they both try to induce a social political change through art, both provoke and both instigate a reflective thinking process in the viewer. Furthermore Grünewald, Hofmann et al. have shown that the caricature has found an experimental playground against encrusted rules to create innovative, original formal languages and thus coined the art of modernity (Art Nouveau, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism) (Grünewald, 2002). Nevertheless I think one of the main differences is that caricature can also be understood as journalistic work which is not the case for provocative artwork, hence some caricaturists also agree that their work is rather journalistic than artistic (Grünewald, 2002).

In France, political caricature had its peak during the French Revolution, despite the establishment of a print censor in 1789 or the reaffirmation of state control of printed images in 1794 (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, N. Maria & Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, 1991). However the creators of the few satirical drawings that existed were harshly punished (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, N. Maria & Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, 1991). One of the caricaturist was Eugène Delacroix who created sixteen political cartoons between 1814 and 1822 which nevertheless remained the only caricatures in his career (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, N. Maria & Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, 1991). But also his paintings where provocative and had a strong political affiliation like the *Massacres of Chios* from 1824, *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* from 1826, *Death of Sardanapalus* from 1827 or the *Liberty Leading the People* from 1830. The famous painting *Liberty Leading the People* was commemorating the July revolution of France (Baden, 2015).



Image 4: Delacroix, Eugène: Liberty leading the people, 1830.

The artist painted the symbolic figure of liberty, the *libertas*, half as the Greek goddess Nike, half as the personification of the French nation and its people, also known as the „Marianne“(Baden, 2015). She, as the leader of the barricade, walks over the corpses from the liberation fight, swings the tricolour which was forbidden by the Bourbons, and wears the Phrygian cap of the Jacobins on her head. She is barefoot and almost topless, so that you can see her breast, which creates an absurd but strong and provocative image of the revolution. The painting gained a lot of attention and became the idealised picture of the resistance in the French Revolution in 1789 (Baden, 2015).

Nonetheless there has been much debate about the painter's position during the Revolution (Johnson & Delacroix, 1981). The French writer Alexandre Dumas provides the only eyewitness account of Delacroix's presence in the streets and claimed that the man of the painting who was wearing a top-hat was Delacroix who fought in the Revolution, which Lee Johnson denies (Johnson & Delacroix, 1981). The painting from the 19th century was one of the most widely used of the 20th century for instance for leaflets, posters, textbook covers or advertising (Chatzēnikolaou, 1991). However, Nicos Hadjinicolaou indicates in his work

Freedom leads the people of Eugène Delacroix. Sinn und Gegensinn from 1991 that the painting descriptions described in the 20th century in history books of upper grades do not mention that the painting was actually exposed to enormous violent attacks when it first appeared (Chatzēnikolau, 1991). In 1830, the picture was interpreted in different ways and thus experienced rejection and admiration at the same time (Chatzēnikolau, 1991). Nicos Hadjinicolaou also notes that Delacroix's 28th July title marks a day when nothing has yet been decided in the fights (Chatzēnikolau, 1991). Many saw the picture in the 19th century as positive, but others interpret it as an image of the opposition (Chatzēnikolau, 1991). Some particularly incensed the appearance of the people because they would appear dirty and look like "scoundrels" rather than brave heroes (Chatzēnikolau, 1991). Especially about the allegorical "figure of freedom" there are many contradictory reviews. Some see a goddess of victory in their ancient origins, others see her as an "ordinary and dirty woman" (Chatzēnikolau, 1991, p. 72-73). Lee Johnson is bringing with a story about an actual event in the Revolution which apparently was meant to have a direct influence on Delacroix's painting a different view to light:

"By far the most convincing and important contemporary evidence of an actual episode in the Revolution having a direct influence on Delacroix's picture is contained in an anonymous pamphlet 'Un fair inconnu de juillet 1830' and datable to 1831. The author states that Delacroix took inspiration from the heroic action of Anne-Charlotte D., a poor laundry-girl who, dressed in only a petticoat ('jupon'), went in search of her young brother Antoine, an apprentice gilder who was fighting in the streets on 27 July. At length, she fell on Antoine's naked corpse; found carrying arms, he had just been shot by a platoon of Swiss troops. Counting ten bullet wounds in his chest, she swore to kill as many Swiss. She shot nine, but as she tore her tenth cartridge a Captain of lancers killed her with a blow of his sabre. In this incident, whether it be rumour or fact or, most likely, a mixture of both, would seem to lie the seed of Delacroix's conception of the half-nude corpse (Johnson & Delacroix, 1981, p. 147)."

The reason I chose the painting of Delacroix is the fact that nowadays it seems like a political painting of a political situation, like a documentation of what has happened. However, back then I believe the painting was very provocative especially because of Delacroix's choice how to illustrate the woman as well as

the people. Even though today it does not seem to be provocative, back in the 18th century it clearly was, as numerous disputes about the painting can prove. This shows that a provocation is not only linked to a specific place but also always linked to its specific time.

Especially since the 19th century provocative art increased when artists were responding to politics, war and social dilemmas during the century. The late 1950s introduced the idea of *Happenings* as a form of „participation performance“ and in the 1970s *Performance art* became popular (Baden, 2015). Also movies of Ingar Bergman, Andy Warhol or Pier Paolo Pasolini were causing great debates and created scandals themselves. Another well-known artist that has to be mentioned in the context of art provocation in the late 1960s and 1970s, is Joseph Beuys whose provocative artworks achieved a wide audience and gained great attention. The social activist artists in the late 1960s were however questioning the authority and exclusionary practices in the art world, in terms of both its institutions and its aesthetic strategies (Felshin, 1995). So did the *Artworker's Coalition*, founded in 1969, which was probably the best-known artist organization of the time which fought against war and tried to give minorities more power within the art world as well outside of it (Felshin, 1995). In order to achieve more political participation, they and other groups broke out of the art venues and exhibited their works at public spaces. The fact that a political work is exhibited in public, does not guarantee comprehension nor public participation; political art is not synonymous with activist art (Felshin, 1995).

From the mid-1970s until the 1990s a wide development merged the art world and the world of political activism (Felshin, 1995). Artists were breaking out of the museum and galleries to present their work in public spaces to gain new audiences and encourage public participation (Felshin, 1995). The American curator Nina Felshin points out, that the steps taken in the 1970s towards a more democratic climate were in the 1980s completely reversed with a cult of the individual artist, market-driven concerns and the prestige of collecting (Felshin, 1995). Furthermore male painters again dominated the art scene until the late 1980s and the gains of feminism in the art world of the 1970s seemed to vanish (Felshin, 1995). In response to that development, Gran Fury, the Guerilla Girls

and further art collectives, tried to address the art world's cultural elitism as well as political issues like the nuclear crisis, sexism, racism, imperialism, homelessness or the AIDS crisis (Felshin, 1995).

Activist art is more process-oriented rather than product-oriented and it customarily takes place in public spaces rather than within the art world's venues (Felshin, 1995). Ordinarily activist art takes form as temporal interventions like performances, media events or exhibitions and it often makes use of billboards, posters, newspaper inserts or by advertising in subways or buses (Felshin, 1995). In addition activist art relies on the participation of the audience (Felshin, 1995). In a lot of cases the audience who participates are the people and victims who are mentioned through the work and thereby procure a voice and visibility (Felshin, 1995). Activist artists mostly join a collective where the members can vary and the focus on teamwork is more relevant than independent expression (Felshin, 1995). The works of activist art collectives were completed by public expression in form of protests, demonstrations, Guerilla theatre and media events (Felshin, 1995). Especially News media was used to their advantages as they were able to influence public opinion (Felshin, 1995). Therefore it did not take long until media manipulation, also in form of provocation, became the central feature of most activism in order to create a wide public debate about certain issues (Felshin, 1995). Additionally art activists used commercial advertising and applied a direct, powerful, sometimes ironic or understated provocative text which guaranteed a broad versatile audience and a debate about the provocative work. Gran Fury was for instance known as a „band of individuals united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis“ (Meyer, 1995). The collective from New York City was founded in 1988, disbanded in 1992 and created some of the most arresting AIDS activist graphics during that time period (Meyer, 1995). The fight against silence and the invisibility of AIDS had been a matter of life and death for many people in the early 1980s. Especially for homosexual communities it was important to defend the AIDS victims as the media and government representatives rode violent attacks against them which were often moralizing and vindictive (Philipps, 2002). Gran Fury was not the only artists who dealt with the topic of AIDS, many others like Felix Gonzales-Torres

were also trying to fight against the one-sided image by unfolding the discrimination, fear, shame, desperation and political repression that came along with the topic (Spector, 1995). Gran Fury tried to absolve all people living with AIDS of blame and to shift guilt to the government, the public and media instead (Philipps, 2002). In order to do so, the art collective fought back with provocative slogans and works like *Silence = Death, The Government Has Blood On Its Hands* or *Kissing Doesn't Kill* (Clark, 1997).

The work *Kissing Doesn't Kill* retained large posters that were affixed to the sides of the city buses that represent three interracial couples which are dressed in high contrast colours and are kissing each other.



Image 5: Gran Fury: Kissing Doesn't Kill. Greed and Indifference Do, 1989.

On first sight the posters appear as just another series of advertisements from the brand *United Colors of Benetton* which are promoting their retail sales but once one has a second look, it however becomes obvious that its agenda has nothing to do with the brand and its clothes but rather can be seen in a much larger context. It becomes clear that this advertisement is not related to retail sales since each of the couples disrupted conventional notions of relationships, as it is one interracial heterosexual, a gay and a lesbian couple, and since a banner caption, that fills the entire image, declares „Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do“. Moreover on the right side of the poster is a small box with

a text saying „Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis.“

Since its initial appearance in 1989 the work *Kissing Doesn't Kill* became an activist classic. It was reproduced in mainstream and alternative presses, reprinted several thousand times and even restaged as a music video which was broadcast on European MTV and American public television (Meyer, 1995). The work uses the strategy to mimic the advertisement of capitalist pleasure to capture the viewer's attention and then direct it to the AIDS crisis. To achieve that, Gran Fury displayed their work at sites like urban billboards, bus shelters, subway trains, newspaper vending machines, and on television screens (Meyer, 1995). Furthermore it fights against the misinformation that one of the risk behaviours for AIDS includes kissing and on top of that supports sexual freedom. Adding the posters to the public spaces enables Gran Fury to transfer their messages into as many public spaces, neighbourhoods, communities and people's minds as possible. Moreover alongside other advertisements of mass media, the serious meaning is seeking as much attention as any other advertisement for non-political topics. The interesting part about it is, that people neither expect a political message from the environment nor from the visual appearance of the posters which could therefore address a completely different group of people:

„Gran Fury member Avram Finkelstein describes the success of *Kissing Doesn't Kill* as deriving from the fact that it puts 'political information into environments where people are unaccustomed to finding it...It's very different from being handed a leaflet where you automatically know someone's trying to tell you something and you may not be receptive to hearing it. But when you're walking down the street and you're gazing at advertising...who knows what goes through [your] mind?'" (Meyer, 1995, p. 53).

The work might appeal to an audience that usually avoids dealing with the difficult issues of the AIDS crisis which could therefore lead to new awareness and activity. One major aspect contributing to the particularity of Gran Fury's work was chiefly their attempt to rely on visual pleasure instead of terror. The aim was to present the crisis in a different way without frightening the audience with a focus on death or drug users but rather portraying the abjection of individuals

(Meyer, 1995). Member Marlene McCarty said about the work: „There was no way we were going to make victim photography or extend the dominant representation of AIDS as pathetic images of people dying in hospital beds“ (Meyer, 1995, p. 56). *Kissing Doesn't Kill* puts a focus on a different context and accordingly achieved more attention than accustomed.

The illustrated examples have shown that there are many different kinds of provocations within the art world. Some are against politics, the state or generally the ones who have more power, some are against religion, others against behaviours of people within the society and question certain morals and some are generally against discrimination or injustices. Each provocation only works in its specific time and its specific place. Not every provocative artwork is considered as provocative during the time of formation but rather later during a different time period with different politics, laws and morality. In this case it is questionable if one can still call these cases a provocation since it was not the intention of the artist to provoke which is the main aspect of my definition of provocative artwork. Therefore I would name it political art rather than provocative art since in my opinion the artist's intention of provoking is indispensable for the definition.

3.3 The question about morality

Every provocation is dealing with the aspect of morality since provocations tend to break laws, norms and also moral beliefs of people in order to provoke them. The term “morality” is certainly very complex and has underwent many analyses of philosophers, sociologists or psychologists. Therefore there exist various different definitions of what particularly defines it. However, I will keep my definition of the term quiet short and put my focus rather on a specific example of a provocation which arose a great morality debate in society in order to highlight the complex issue of artists while provoking people's morality beliefs.

The authors Bernard Gert and Joshua Gert divide the term morality in their article *The Definition of Morality* in two separate broad senses, first a descriptive sense and second a normative sense:

“The term ‘morality’ can be used either 1. descriptively to refer to certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour, or 2. normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons” (Gert, Joshua, & Zalta, 2017).

In the morality issue regarding art, artists break morality in a descriptive sense, even though it moreover needs to be distinguished between morality, law and religion. The normative sense cannot be the aim of the artist since his provocation would not be successful if every rational person would see it as a break of morality, the provocation would be too extreme and transfer the guilt only to the artists and not to the actual responsible person for the problem.

In this chapter I shall examine artworks of the well-known artist Santiago Sierra, who is commonly provoking with his artworks in a scandalous manner that receives high media attention and erases big debates about whether or not an artist should have absolute freedom in his artistic expression. Certainly there are various famous scandalous artists to choose from in order to discuss the question of morality, like Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde in a vitrine from 1991 or the shocking photograph *Piss Christ* of Andres Serrano from 1987 which shows a small plastic crucifix submerged in a small glass tank of the artist's urine.

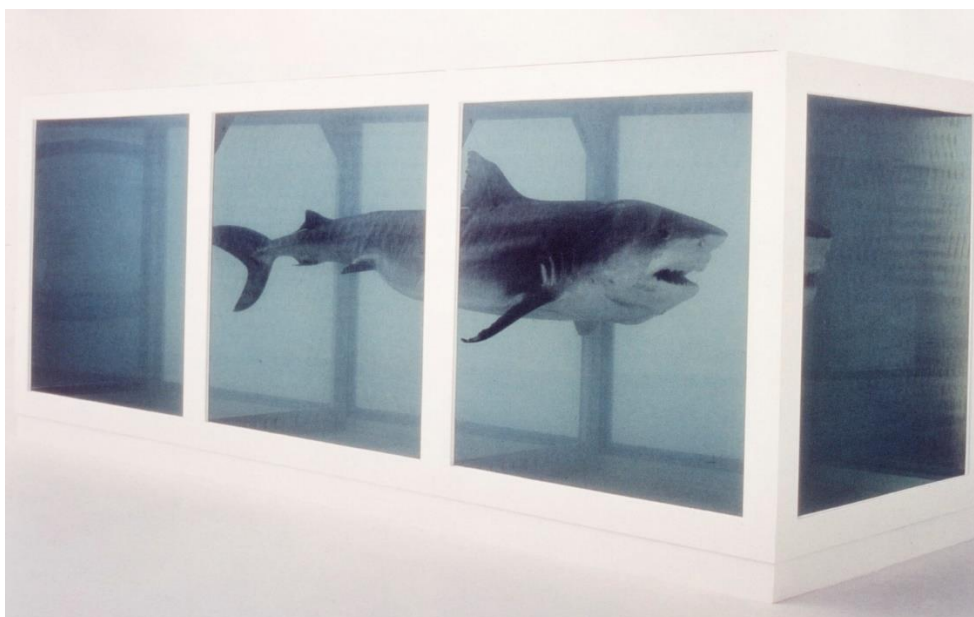


Image 7: Hirst, Damien: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.

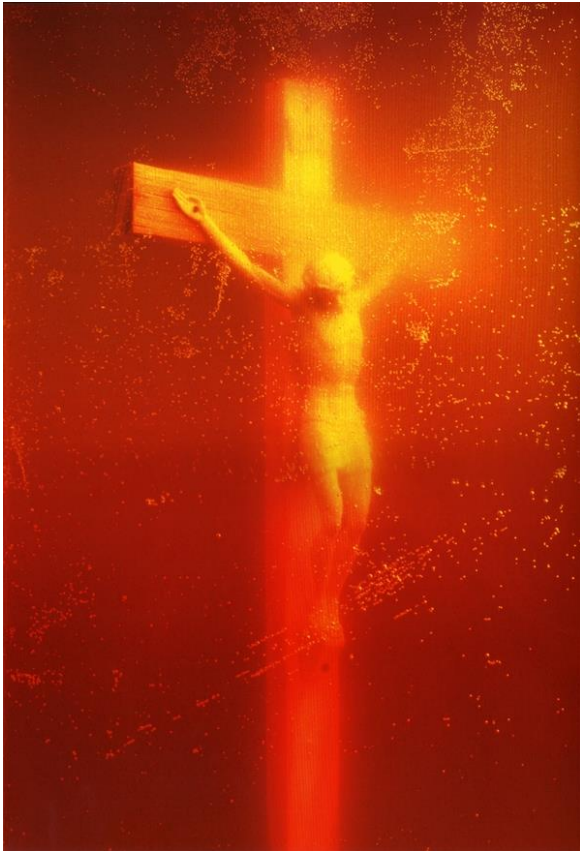


Image 6: Serrano, Andres: Piss Christ, 1987.

Provocative artworks that cause big scandals and debates seem relentless. However, I put my focus on Santiago Sierra as only recently in the beginning of 2018 one of his artworks got removed from a gallery in Madrid because of the request by the head of the *ARCO International Art fair* (Macher, 2018). The 24 piece portrait series *Presos políticos españoles contemporáneos* showed contemporary political Spanish prisoners, like separatists and artists. The portraits were pixelated but texts informed the readers about the portrayed person. In comparison to some of his former artworks the work is in morality terms quiet moderate but regarding the current political situation in Spain reason enough to remove it from the gallery which caused a great sensation in the media. Are artists in Spain not allowed to express their artistic opinions anymore? Santiago Sierra is well-known for provoking, but all his current work had been tolerated until this point. Now since he directs his work directly to the Spanish government, it is censored. It is a great example of how closely connected politics

and art even in democratic countries still are and furthermore shows how easily provocative artworks can cross established boundaries.

In the following I want to discuss further artworks from Santiago Sierra who caused more than once wide-reaching debates about morality in art. In his controversial installations, the artist hires labourers to perform useless tasks in white-cube-spaces like holding up a heavy block of wood, get tattooed, sit inside a cardboard box, masturbate, get penetrated or have their hair dyed blond for receiving the minimum wage in return and let the museum visitors observe the spectacle. The installations are additionally documented by video, photography and text. The people he focuses on in his works are the ones who are the most invisible and isolated within society, like asylum seekers, prostitutes, drug addicts and poor unemployed or underpaid people, the ones who suffer the most under the capitalist system. Furthermore, he concentrates on race issues, nationalism and immigration policies since in his mind countries are just a product of political powers. In the *Venice Biennale* in 2003 Santiago Sierra sealed the building's entrance with cinderblocks, covered the word "Spanish Pavillon" and only let visitors in who walked to the back door and showed their Spanish passports.



Image 8: Sierra, Santiago: Biennale Venedig, 2003.

Inside the building they could only see the leftovers from the previous year's installation. With this artwork he wanted to highlight that the countries who participate in the Biennale are the most powerful ones in the world and that they

are all playing at national pride: “The Spanish press took it as a provocation, when it was simply a reflection [...]. A nation is actually nothing; countries don’t exist. [...]. They are political constructions, and what’s inside a construction? Whatever you want to put there” (Margolles, Hegarty, & Sierra, 2002/2004, p. 64). In year 2000 he paid a man to live hidden behind a brick wall at P.S. 1 in New York for 15 days.



Image 9: Sierra, Santiago: P.S. 1, 2000.

Many people could not see the art in this performance and denounced Sierra for bad treatment of the man. Hence the person itself, who was a museum watchman, said that no one had ever been so interested in him (Margolles et al., 2002/2004). It seems that people accuse the artist for isolating the man from them, making him invisible and hence treating him bad, while in fact they were doing the same during their museum visits without being conscious about it. The man was now more visible and part of them as ever before.

In his work *Raising of six Benches* in 2001 in the *Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung* in Munich he let forty men lift six benches for two hours a day during two weeks.



Image 10: Sierra, Santiago: Raising six Benches, 2001.

Here too, the indignation towards the artist for torturing people for no reason was very high. Even though he paid the men the minimum wage and they just worked for receiving their salary like many people do day by day. In a different work from 2000 at the Berlin *Kunstverein Kunst-Werke*, he let six asylum seeker sit on a chair with a cardboard box over them without paying them:

“Well, I have been called an exploiter. At the Kunstwerke in Berlin they criticized me because I had people sitting for four hours a day, but they didn’t realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a day on his feet. You want to stick your finger in the wound and say that the work is definitely torture, that it is indeed a punishment of biblical proportions. And when you put your name on the work it seems that you’re held responsible for the capitalist system itself” (Margolles et al., 2002/2004, p. 64).



Image 11: Sierra, Santiago: Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes, 2000.

The reason he did not pay the asylum seekers was because of the German law that decreased the chances of getting asylum if the asylum seekers had an income (Wagner, 2006). Therefore when he went to the refugee centre he found volunteers but they all refused to get paid. What Santiago Sierra did, was simply highlighting the problem itself. He did what everybody else was doing. Leaving them isolated from society with no money. One of the asylum seekers in the refugee centre said about his volunteering part of sitting for four hours in a box: “So what? That is exactly what we are doing here [in the refugee centre] every day” (Wagner, 2006, p. 112).

In year 2000 Sierra made a video documenting the work *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* in *El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo* in Salamanca where he hired four prostitutes addicted to heroin to tattoo them a horizontal line on their back for the price of one shot of heroin.

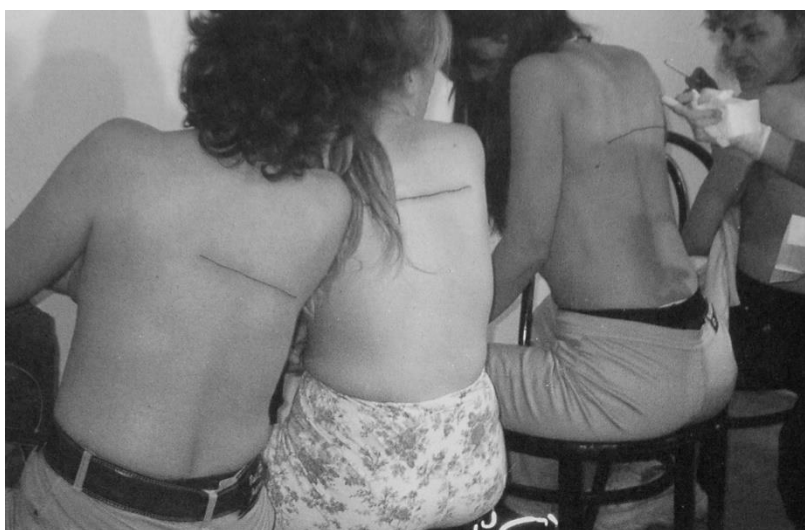


Image 12: Sierra, Santiago: *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, 2000.

In the video of the process he explains that the prostitutes normally charge between 15 and 17 dollar while the price of a shot of heroin is about 67 dollar (Manchester, 2000). Certainly, Santiago Sierra became kind of a promoter of the heroin addiction of these women and used their economic situation for his artwork. Nonetheless if he would have not given them the money, they would have earned it as prostitutes. So either way nothing would have changed even though Sierra is clearly not trying to be the saviour but rather acts as part of the

problem itself. Moreover the voyeuristic act of the visitors and the art world purchasing his work, makes all of them part of the problem too.

What gets visible in observing Sierra's artworks is that people who witness the procedures feel not only pity for the people in the artworks but also bad about themselves for watching the procedures passively. The curator Thomas R. Huber formulates this phenomenon in his article *Striking a blow. Santiago Sierras Arbeiten als Beispiele einer Ästhetik der Begegnung* from 2015 as the following: „They inevitably become representatives of the ruling order and thus accomplices of the punitive power” (Huber, 2015, p. 6).⁷ Santiago Sierra generally rewarded the people for their service by paying the minimum wage of the area he would present his work in or in the case of the asylum seekers not pay any wage at all since their chances of asylum in Germany decreased when they had an income. In the end, he does nothing else than highlighting these workers, prostitutes or asylum seekers lives and the way they have to sell their body in order to survive in the world we live in. Moreover he displays the invisibility of them as part of our society, which is why he mostly shows them from their backside or even hides them. But not only do they have to deal with invisibility, which gets very well visually illustrated in his works, they also have to deal with isolation. Nevertheless many people call the artist an exploiter (Hoffmann, Jonas, Beier, & Gehlhoff, op. 2005). In Sierra's artworks the own and the foreign body is the subject and the victim of art (Engelbert & Herlt, 2002). Sierra's concept in his artworks is a combination of formal and political economic violence against people while turning them into cynical works of art (Engelbert & Herlt, 2002). The reason why they want to be part of the artwork is in many cases very likely the money they gain from it and that they depend on but perhaps also the opportunity to be part of his art which is probably more pleasant to them than the work they usually have to do. Therefore they all carry their biographical background into the artwork which makes it morally even more complex:

“Whenever you pay for your dignity, you put your body and your time in the hands of a third party. By saying these few things in my work, I think that, as an artist, I've achieved enough. In any case, I don't see a connection between politics and morality or between art and morality. A

⁷ My translation

banker who buys one of my pieces is like a newspaper that accepts letters to the editor. Self-criticism makes you feel morally superior, and I give high society and high culture the mechanisms to unload their morality and their guilt” (Margolles et al., 2002/2004, p. 65).

Santiago Sierra tries to demonstrate that we all work for the ones who have the power, even he himself, since the banks or governments pay for the expositions in museums (Margolles et al., 2002/2004). In his artworks he is the one paying these people and even though it is a symbol for the system, he is part of the system himself. Sierra highlights an existing problem, which is mainly the capitalist system in the world, but does not exclude himself from it. He shocks people with demonstrations of everyday situations of people that are not so much in the focus of attention. I do not believe that he wants to put the guilt to a specific person or group but rather express a consciousness that we are all part of the problem. However, I also get the feeling that when he refers to self-criticism which makes people feel superior, that it has the same effect on him. It is not his aim to really make a change, like he says himself:

“If I thought about how to give real visibility to these people, I wouldn’t have chosen the art world as a platform to do it, but rather a determined political activism – but I don’t trust that either. Let’s say that I do things because I think they should be included in the art world, but I don’t have grandiose dreams that I’ll actually achieve anyone’s redemption, because that’s absurd. When you sell a photograph for \$11,000 you can’t possibly redeem anyone except yourself” (Margolles et al., 2002/2004, p. 65).

Regarding this statement I come to the conclusion that Santiago Sierra is aware that he is part of the system, he is aware that he will not make a real change with his artworks by raising consciousness only in the art world, but he is still presenting his work in a way that gives the illusion that exactly this is his aim. However, after a closer consideration, it becomes clear that he is not taking the guilt away of himself and tries to transfer it to a third party but includes himself, the observer and the third party, which are the people with money and power. He simply shows that everybody is part of the problem. If people feel that he is morally acting wrong, they do it themselves too. He displays the people that are usually not seen by the visitors, the people who do hard work with their body but seem invisible. The white clean rooms of art institutions that display expensive

artworks by an elite that the visitors enjoy to watch, now show what is usually not seen in the art world. On the first view the works seem to be aesthetically correct and familiar like six cardboard boxes positioned next to each other in a white cube but on a second view morally and social discomfort of the viewers rises. The author Thomas Wagner said in his book *Freihändig. Wahrnehmungen der Kunst* from 2006 that after “What you see is what you see` now the new formula is `What you don't see, you can feel`” (Wagner, 2006, p. 112). Santiago Sierra's provoking artwork is not a question of transferring guilt, nor does he aim to change something or feel morally superior, it is just a representation of the world we live in. If someone feels offended by his work, they should therefore rather feel offended by the world and the society itself. His artworks are mostly morally incorrect, but so is the outcome of the capitalist system. With his big scandals, which he definitely is intending, he highlights a problem and gives visibility to customarily invisible people of society. Nevertheless, I am not sure if his artworks really have the effect to showcase that the whole system is creating the problem but perhaps set the focus too much on the scandal itself so that the message behind the provocative art gets lost since people mostly seem to discuss whether the artist should be allowed to do this kind of work. However, the current debate about his censored artwork in Madrid had probably a better effect than it would ever had without the censorship. He achieved exactly what his artwork was supposed to tell which makes the whole act of censorship like a completion of the work itself. It undoubtedly will not stop Santiago Sierra from provoking with his artworks and crossing the borders of morals and laws in the future.

3.4 The effects of provocation in art

Certainly it is impossible to talk about the effects of provocation in general terms, since each provocation has its own effect, be it success or failure. In order to really see the reasons for the outcome of a provocation and to formulate an agenda with different aspects that lead to one or another, it would be necessary to analyse and study profoundly numerous types of provocation, which is not the

aim of my work. Nonetheless what I came across my research and found immensely interesting, was the difference between provocation within and without the museum venues. I regard it as important to study the difference rather as a question that artists ask themselves while creating their provocative artworks. Therefore I am not going to analyse the effect itself rather than the question why do artists work within or without the museum and gallery venues and what effect do they expect to see and for what reason.

3.4.1 Art provocation within and without the museum venue

The exhibition space is an important issue if the aim of the artwork is to cause social change. Only a small group of people who are part of the art world are attending exhibitions and therefore only a small part is getting educated through the artworks. It is questionable if they are the community that the message of these political exhibitions is addressed to. When thinking again about Walter Benjamin's speech *The Author as Producer* from 1934, he claims that „political commitment functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind and not as a producer“ (Benjamin, 1998, p. 91). Regarding political art exhibitions, the artists and curators are often only talking to the addresses in their mind but not in the exhibition itself. They mostly use a language that is only understood by people who have knowledge about arts, the presented topic and the gift of education and critical reflection. Hence a big group of the society is left out, which makes it hard to achieve a social political change. The author Andrea Wolper questions in her text *Making Art, Reclaiming Lives. The Artist and Homeless Collaborative* in Nina Felshin's book *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* from 1995, whether

„art – whose practice often is considered a luxury, and whose product, at least in recent years, may be considered solely for its market value – [can] have any appreciable impact on the lives of people struggling merely to survive? [...] [Further] can art function as a community come together to create something not seen before? “ (Wolper, 1995, p. 252).

Founder of *The Artist and Homeless Collaborative (A&HC)*, Hope Sandrow, affirms Wolper's question (Wolper, 1995). She established the *A&HC* in the 1990s as an interactive project that neither rejects nor alienates the artwork from its social context (Wolper, 1995). People from the New York City shelters were doing art and exhibitions to show that art does not have to be a practice considered as a luxury, but as Hope Sandrow calls it, can function as a „kind of operating theatre“, in which the polarized segments of a community comes together and create art (Wolper, 1995). The reason for the project was the aim to give the homeless individuals a voice, as homelessness may often be the subject of artworks but the homeless people themselves are mostly left out of the conversation (Wolper, 1995). The *A&HC* however managed to make a real change in getting people out of the shelters with creating positive experiences, giving them back their individual identity and confidence in human interaction (Wolper, 1995). With the attempt to empower the underprivileged, the boundaries between them and the privileged got eliminated. Furthermore, the people that are usually portrayed in the artworks as the victims of the social dilemmas, were getting access to the art world's venues that they were usually not part of. In this way education through art is possible; the artists get educated by the people that suffer under the social political situations and they on the other hand get educated by the artists and their work.

The author and curator Jens Hoffmann's writes in *The curator as an agent of social change* in his book *Theatre of exhibition* from 2015 that social and political change is possible with education through art (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). He suggests to analyse art and ones experience of it within a broader cultural framework (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). As every medium, such as literature, film, performance, or elements of cultural history, can be presented in art exhibitions, it is possible to achieve education through it (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). Nevertheless an artwork can only provide an insight into the presented topic which can lead into more awareness but in order to learn something about the background information there has to be more than only the artwork itself. It is questionable if the art institutions have more possibilities to educate through art

since art in the public is more temporary and only highlights a problem but does not really go further than that or delivers a theoretical analysis.

In this context I want to refer to George Passmore and Gilbert Proesch, known as Gilbert & George, who got popular since 1969 by doing performances as a *Living Sculpture* (Kasprzik, 1991). With their English suits they built a high contrast to the hippie movement during the time. Their work *Singing Sculpture* which was their final work at the London St. Martin's School of Art, made them suddenly famous (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005).



Image 13: Gilbert & George: The Singing Sculpture. We dream our dream away, 1970.

They moved as a singing sculpture with silver and golden coloured faces to the sounds of the song *Underneath the Arches*, which was a parody of the British concentration on class statuses (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). Nonetheless their main work soon became a portrayal of London's life with its death, violence, sexuality, fear and hope.

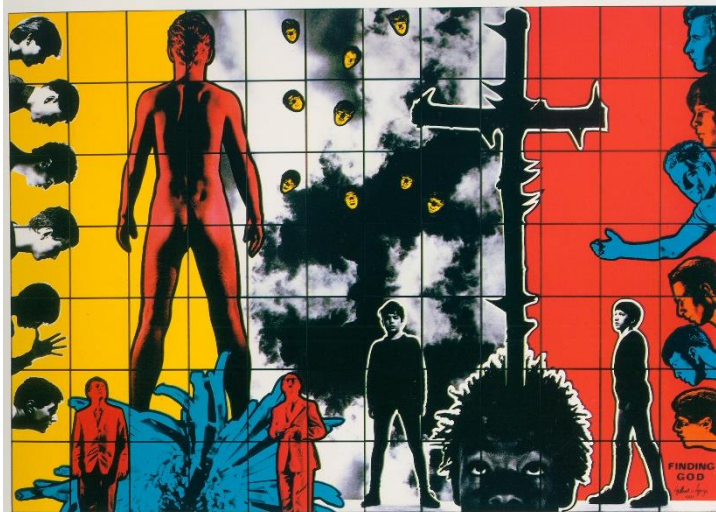


Image 14: Gilbert & George, Finding God, 1982.

Gilbert & George attempted to turn against the Modern Art as it was in their opinion more confusing than understandable (Kasprzik, 1991). They, on the contrary, wanted to be understood with their artwork in order to create “Art for All” which became the basic principle in their work (Kasprzik, 1991). The most used topics of their works are discrimination, pietism, sexuality and religion. The new aspect from Gilbert & George is not the portrayal of the real life, because movements like these had already existed for instance in the Realism in the 19th century but the interesting part is their aim to create art for everybody. The focus on a different audience than the one that ordinarily can be found within the art world's venues, became also a big issue in the Activist Art that started in the 1970s.

Customarily activist art takes form as temporal interventions like performances, media events or exhibitions in public spaces and it often makes use of billboards, posters, newspaper inserts or by advertising in subways or buses (Felshin, 1995). In addition it relies on the participation of the audience (Felshin, 1995). In the 1970s the works of activist art collectives were completed by public expression in form of protests, demonstrations, guerrilla theatre and media events (Felshin, 1995). News media especially was used to their advantages as they were able to inform and influence public opinion (Felshin, 1995). With their breakout of the museum and galleries, activist art collectives were able to reach a broader and different audience. They used simple but strong and conspicuous slogans on their

works, and spread awareness about topics that were mostly not discussed. Nevertheless also activist art collectives have to intervene within the art world's venues in a certain way, as they rely on their money in order to be able to continue their work (Meyer, 1995).

The activist artwork *Kissing Doesn't Kill* from Gran Fury that I was presenting in chapter 3.2 was initially created for the *Art Against AIDS On the Road*, a 1989 public art project with auctions of contemporary art to benefit the *American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR)* (Meyer, 1995). The invitation for Gran Fury to participate in the project, alongside of artists like Barbara Kruger or Cindy Sherman points out the amount of attention the art collective received at the time. Later on they also got invitations to exhibit their work in spaces like the *Whitney Museum of American Art* or the *Venice Biennale* (Meyer, 1995). Even though the art collective received great feedback and financial support from the contemporary art world, they still insisted on the works connection to the AIDS activist movement and emphasized the need to display their work in public spaces (Gober, R., Gober, & Fury, 1990). Their goal was not to become celebrated within the art world but to get financially supported by them and to spread the message through their art venues (Gober, R. et al., 1990). Nevertheless Gran Fury also had to deal with disputes as *AMFAR* refused to run the text: „Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis“ on the bus panel. The collective had the choice to drop the entire project or eliminate the text, which they thought would be the better option and hoped that the kissing couples and the primary slogan were strong enough to transfer the message (Meyer, 1995). For this reason some viewers assumed that the poster was about the rights of lesbians and gay men to kiss in public which in Chicago led to the prohibition of the poster on mass transit as they did not want to promote this „lifestyle“ (Meyer, 1995). Thereupon the *American Civil Liberties Union* soon joined forces with the local lesbian and gay community to protest the prohibition as unconstitutional (Meyer, 1995). However after weeks of lobbying the prohibition was defeated in the State House of Representatives (Meyer, 1995). In August 1990 several dozen poster of *Kissing Doesn't Kill* were displayed on Chicago buses and subway platforms. However within 24 hours

almost all of them were defaced by vandalism which was widely reported by the press and caused a big controversy about homosexuality, homophobia and AIDS (Meyer, 1995). *Kissing Doesn't Kill* became Gran Fury's most widely seen and its most successful protest in AIDS activism (Philipps, 2002) and shows the positive effect of provocative artworks outside of the art institutions since it has attracted the attention of a large number of people and caused a prohibition of the work, a worldwide dispute, many demonstrations, vandalism and protests, but above all a public opinion exchange of a so far taboo subject.

The public space has the ability to encourage the public audience to respond to the artwork, whereas exhibition spaces legitimise the work of art and only attract people who are already active in the art world. Thus the public space can become creative material in itself, where the artwork integrates it, rather than simply being exhibited there (Ancel & Girel, 2015). Daniel Buren was one of the first to do that in the 1960s, he displayed his work in its original place next to official exhibition pieces (Ancel & Girel, 2015). In his artwork in situ he realises his works for a particular place which makes all of his works temporary and dependent on the place where they are realised.



Image 15: Buren, Daniel: Coincidence on: la place des colonnes, 1984.

After the exhibition nothing will be left of his artwork except of the memory of it. Even though there are photographs of the artwork Daniel Buren precedes every photograph with the word “Souvenir photo” so that they can never become saleable items (Buren, Kliege, & Nollert, 2009). Daniel Buren made things visible that were usually not shared with the public but only with the ones entering the museum space: “The aim was to develop a form of art that can be shared with the general public, that requires no prior knowledge, that places no hierarchical obstacle between artist and viewer, and that allows the contents to be read directly from the work of art” (Buren et al., 2009, n.p.).

In 1972 he showed in a gallery in Rome a work with yellow and white stripes and then placed a second identical one in the street outside of the gallery (Buren et al., 2009).



Image 16: Buren, Daniel: Travail in situ, 1973.



Image 17: Buren, Daniel: Travail in situ, 1973.

The work showed how important the exhibition space is for our understanding of art but also questions the whole museum space. The German art historian Armin Zweite states that Buren's work is about the truth and the authenticity of art which can only be achieved if the framework given in the realization of the work is not changed and if the public accessibility is guaranteed (Zweite, 1996). Important is the interplay of the studio and the exhibition at the same time. Buren propagates authenticity, in his opinion the true and authentic of art can only be realized in a specific place, in a particular situation and at a certain time for a limited duration (Zweite, 1996). Therefore none of his works have the chance to be capitalized as commodities (Zweite, 1996). Furthermore this act made it possible for an audience outside of the art venues who usually are not part of the art world to make a statement and to deal with the artwork.

Another example of an artist who is well-known for exhibiting in the public space, is Klaus Staeck who is regarded as one of the most important graphic designers

and caricaturists. With his posters in the late 1960s, he managed to raise awareness for political issues of the time. He provoked one side of the society and spoke right from the heart of the other side, but he always managed to keep the balance of not being too provocative but still provocative enough.



Image 18: Staeck, Klaus: Die Kunst ist frei [The Art is free], 1987.

In his book *Ohne Auftrag. Unterwegs in Sachen Kunst und Politik* from year 2000, he explained that especially in the beginning of his work, the distribution of the posters was always the biggest challenge he had to deal with (Staeck, 2000). Unquestionably, many people, especially politicians, wanted to prevent the spreading of his posters, but in order to function as a provocation in public, the posters must have reached as many people as possible (Staeck, 2000). However, in year 2000, when he published his book, the situation already looked due to the Internet quite different. In this time he was able to send his work annually by mail in a so-called "Staeckbrief" with a circulation of 20,000 copies/pieces (Staeck, 2000). But when the medium internet was not yet as present as it is today, it was particularly important to Staeck to create a so-called "counter-public" in order to continue a creation of a forum for uncomfortable, repressed and oppressed opinions (Staeck, 2000).

Although Staeck can look back on 3.000 solo exhibitions in the year 2000, publicly funded cultural institutions such as museums and art associations were usually not among his exhibition venues (Staeck, 2000). As almost all of them were and still are financially dependent on their respective committees, they were not able to take too much risk in exhibiting his work (Staeck, 2000). Accordingly the interest to cooperate with one of the most critical graphic designers and caricaturists was correspondingly low (Staeck, 2000). Therefore his exhibition venues included among others universities, libraries, town halls, train station halls, pedestrian zones, churches, pubs, hiking trails, Goethe Institutes and also galleries (Staeck, 2000). Ironically, many of Staeck's works have become popular through his opponents themselves, as they sued the artist and his posters in court (Staeck, 2000). Certainly, particularly the media perceived these conflicts, as they guaranteed a public scandal, thus providing even greater attention to Staeck's work. Intimidation with court cases of large corporations, parties, organizations, associations and powerful individuals did not reach Staeck, who himself studied law and is allowed to call himself a lawyer (Staeck, 2000). By the year 2000, he had been charged forty-one times in court, but he was however able to win every one of the trials (Staeck, 2000). In his self-defence, he did not refer to the art reservation "Art is free" contained in the German Basic Law of Article 5, but instead to the general right of freedom of expression which is also enshrined in the German Basic Law (Staeck, 2000). Staeck wanted to make this right available to everyone since its realization, as he says, can distinguish democracies from dictatorships (Staeck, 2000). So that even those who are commonly not heard in public debates can effectively contribute their opinion (Staeck, 2000). Staeck says that alone on account of the risk and the length of trials in court, he has never provoked them, but when he was charged to court, he then tried to mobilize as large a public as possible (Staeck, 2000). Here it is particularly important to mention the phenomenon that the enlightened public almost always supports the less powerful, in this case him as an artist (Staeck, 2000). Hence he can not only trust on the spreading of his social and political information through media and his opponents but also on the trust of the law of the right of the freedom of expression as well as the support of the society.

In the text *The curator as an agent of social change* Jens Hoffmann's talks about a comment by Leo Kerz in which he describes the *epic theatre* as a „theatre of awareness that could comment and communicate beyond the linear progression and fragmentary story of the page-play itself“ (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005, p. 30). Jens Hoffmann is comparing Leo Kerz' description with an exhibition where one can think through ideas, history, and culture and becomes aware of ones surrounding world (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). Epic theatre is mostly associated with the German playwright-director Bertolt Brecht and the dramatic theory from the 1920s onward ("Epic theatre"). Its main goal is to encourage the audience to think for themselves without empathizing the characters and getting caught up in the play ("Epic theatre"). In order to achieve the distance and an object reflection, the actors keep a distance between themselves and the characters they play and the story gets interrupted a few times ("Epic theatre"). Bertolt Brecht's intention was to appeal to the audience's intellect in presenting moral problems and reflecting social realities during the play ("Epic theatre"). The intersection between the epic theatre and a political exhibition in the sense of Jens Hoffmann is the independent thinking of the visitors. With its title, its texts, its artworks, their description and the venues, an exhibition is able to take away any critical individual thought from the visitors, but can vice versa also leave them the freedom to make their own experience and create their own independent opinion. For instance, in 2011 Jens Hoffmann created together with Adriano Pedrosa the exhibition *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial), 2011* with works from Félix González-Torres for the *12th Istanbul Biennial*. The title was meant to leave the exhibition open to various forms of interpretation because for Félix Gonzáles-Torres „meaning' is always shifting in time and space“ (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005, p. 31). In this way the visitors are able to experience the exhibition without any in advance given opinion which could lead into more awareness and reflection. The curators choose González-Torres because they saw his work as politically provocative but also as attentive to the formal aspects of artistic production (Hoffmann et al., op. 2005). Félix-González-Torres is a political artist who is aware of the criticism about the elitism of art but does not want to act as the alternative to the institution. He wants to be the one who has the power instead

and function as a “virus” in those establishments (Spector, Reinhardt, & González-Torres, 1994). Félix-González-Torres is a Cuban immigrant and person of colour, queer, HIV positive, feminist, intellectual and an unapologetic leftist (Chambers-Letson, 2009). Therefore at the end of the 1990s González had been seen as one of the most pernicious threat to conservative visions in the US (Chambers-Letson, 2009). He tries to achieve social justice by transforming the social political issues that he has to deal with into his works and exhibit them in museum, galleries or public spaces. His background allows him to speak about the social political issues in a more powerful way. For him, the art world's venues are the places where he has the ability to start social change. Nevertheless he is not only working within the system to change it but rather offers a potential model of cultural production that infiltrates dominant power structures to attack and transform them at a place where they are most vulnerable (Chambers-Letson, 2009). González-Torres refused to give his works official titles but named them *Untitled*, so that the visitors can experience the artworks by themselves which may lead into more awareness and reflection and can then afterwards be spread outside of the art world's venues.

Generally most provocative artworks stay within the art venues and therefore only gain the attention of people who are part of the art culture, people who are interested in art and people who can deal with the luxury of art. This brings me to the conclusion that the art institutions always have the “problem” of their audience which are mostly the same people, from the same group of the society. The public art on the contrary, although if they are able to reach many people, mostly only reach them for a short time and do not offer much substantive analysis. They rely on donors' money and in addition get the most attention through scandals and the media, but could miss the actual topic of their work since the media could only talk about the provocation per se but not about the actual illustrated problem. Regarding these two problems that artists have to deal with when considering where to publish their work in order to gain a greater effect, I believe Matthias Lilienthal's and Kaspar König's thoughts in their book *I promise it's political* from 2002 are important to mention:

“What I am proposing then is that the space of the exhibition is Arendt’s ‘Space of Appearance’ in which a form of political action takes place that is not just ephemeral and based in speech as action but that is also founded on ‘acting without a model’ and on making ‘its means as visible as possible’. If we can accept the space of the exhibition as the arena for such enactments, in which it is we the audience who produce the meanings through our ‘being’ and our acknowledgement of mutualities and imbrications – then what we have is the possibility of another political space. Instead of an occasion for the translation of various sets of politics into the realm of aesthetics and language, instead of a series of exercises in moral navigations that take place in and through the art exhibition, we have the possibility of an actual political space tout court” (Hantelmann, 2002, p. 133).

In my opinion this is an excellent illustration of how the venues of art institutions could be used. Jens Hoffmann for instance tries to let the visitors make their own experience without giving them his opinion in advance. Therefore he did not use a title for his exhibition at the 19th Istanbul Biennial. He engages critical reflection and awareness of the visitors in order to make a social change. Nevertheless it is questionable if he is addressing the community who is able to make a social change or just the people who are active in the art world. Furthermore also the artists who publish their work mostly outside of the art institutions deal with significant problems and I am not sure whether their artworks really always gain the attention for the actual problem or for the provocation itself. In my opinion it should not be the aim of every artist to make his art as clear and understandable as possible. It should rather be focused on a good relationship between art and cultural politics as they have the possibility to get art into the society and turn it away of its elitism. Projects like the *A&HC* are a good example on how art can cause social change. I believe that it is the greatest challenge artists and institutions have to work on in order to seriously produce a social and political change within society.

4. Provocation in the contemporary Iranian art scene

4.1 The social and political situation in Iran

Before I am going to analyse the art scene in Iran as well as Iranian artists living outside of Iran, I think it is necessary to briefly explain the basic features of the country's social and political system in order to better understand the life circumstances and possibilities of the artists. Certainly it is impossible to fully examine the whole complex political history and current situation of Iran. Nevertheless I believe also in terms of provocation, it is inevitable to first explain something about the political power implications and the principles of the Iranian leadership.

Iran's national name was until 1935 Persia and it was a monarchy from antiquity to 1979 (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). After the fall of the Shah regime, the *Islamic Republic of Iran* was declared on the 1st of April in 1979, whose constitution was approved by the public on the 2nd of December in 1979 with 99.5% of the votes (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). This constitution attached the dominant influence of Islam on all political, social and economic issues (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The shi'ite Islam is the state religion of Iran. Fundamental rights are often limited by the principles of Islam. In addition, there is a Shiite lawyer representing the "hidden" twelfth Imam until his return (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). He has the political-religious highest Iranian state office of the *Revolutionary Leader* or also called the *Supreme Religious Leader* (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). This office was initially executed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini until his death on June 3, 1989 (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). One day later, Seijed Ali Khamenei took office, and on July 28, 1989, a new constitution by referendum was adopted (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011).

The *Revolutionary Leader* determines the guidelines of the politics; he is commander-in-chief of the army as well as of the Revolutionary Guards (Frank,

2011). He is determined by an *Expert Council* for an indefinite period and can be disposed by it (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The *Expert Council* exists since 1982, is elected by the public and has 86 exclusively clergy members (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Even though the public may vote for the unicameral parliament every four years with 290 deputies, all laws and ordinances passed by parliament are first reviewed by the *Guardian Council* and require its approval (Frank, 2011). The *Guardian Council* is made up of six secular lawyers and six sacral lawyers which are appointed by the *Supreme Religious Leader* (Frank, 2011). The *Guardian Council* is allowed to sort out candidates admitted to parliamentary elections and is one of Iran's most powerful institutions (Frank, 2011). There is moreover an *Expediency Discernment Council of the System* with 30-35 members, who are also appointed by the *Revolutionary Leader*, including the Minister of the Interior (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The *Expediency Discernment Council of the System* was set up as a conciliation body between the Parliament and the *Guardian Council* (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The president is however elected by the public for four years and appoints the vice-president and proposes to the parliament the members of his cabinet (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). He also has the authority over the *Supreme National Security Council* (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011).

The official usage of "direct vote" by the public belies according to the philosopher and author Michael Frank the real process (Frank, 2011). Hence the population can only choose between the candidates elected by the Guardian Council (Frank, 2011). Thus, it looks only formally as if the president had emerged from democratic elections (Frank, 2011). The current President of Iran is Hassan Rohani, who was elected for the first time on June 14, 2013 with 52.5% of the votes and was re-elected on May 19, 2017 with 57.1% (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Rohani already promised a domestic liberalization in his last election, but because of the great resistance of the conservative-clerical forces, the change have been minor (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The political scope of Rohani,

the government and the parliament against the strictly religious leadership of the *Revolutionary Leader* and the *Guardian Council* is considered as very limited (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Thus, consequently, the election of the public cannot cause much change. In general the power in Iran essentially focuses on three institutions, the *Supreme Religious Leader*, the *Guardian Council* and the *Expert Council* (Frank, 2011). Michael Frank says that in the case of Iran, one can speak not only of an Islamic theocracy, but also of a "leader state", since there is a patriarch as a religious authority who continues the 1979 Islamic revolution (Frank, 2011). Michael Frank even goes so far as to say:

"The mullah government functions like a one-party dictatorship, similar to the NSDAP or the KPsSU under Stalin. The regime is oligarchically organized in the form of several co-ordinated state institutions, but ultimately all subordinate to the Religious Leader and the Guardian Council and work like a gigantic terror machine. Who does not follow the ideology, has no chance to have a position in the political system, but rather is sorted out by the leadership. Although there are elections, these are not free because ultimately the Guardian Council and the "Leader" approves all candidates. [...] The entire policy is designed for total exercise of power of the leader and his vassals. The militarization of society as a whole is being carried out in the most extreme form. Religious ideology serves as a means to mobilize for warfare. [...] Therefore, it can be clearly demonstrated that Iran is a religious dictatorship of a fascist elite" (Frank, 2011, p. 15).

Furthermore, since 2014, an intensification of the suppression of dissenters, opposition or religious minorities has been noted (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). So far, there is no result of Rohani's desire for greater freedom of the press (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Any editor will be liable to prosecution for religious misconduct under the 1979 Press Act (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). This led for instance to the closure of more than 200 newspapers and arrests of more than 300 journalists during the period of Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005-2013 (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The contents are generally controlled by the Ministry of Culture (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Social networks are completely banned, and throttling of Internet traffic and mobile networks is also

very common during periods of political unrest and demonstrations (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). The goal is to create a pure Internet that censors sexually offensive, politically unwanted and criminal content (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Iranian citizens have been banned from contact with numerous Western organizations and the media since early 2010 (Auswärtiges Amt). Iranians were also urged not to maintain "beyond normal levels" contacts with foreigners, foreign embassies and organizations working with them (Auswärtiges Amt). Despite Rohani's attempt to liberalize the country there was still a high number of executions in Iran during the last years, at least 567 in 2016, of which more than 30 were in public (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Moreover, hundreds of political prisoners were still suffering torture (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Freedom of expression, of association and assembly have remained very limited until today (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011).

In addition, economically speaking, the situation of the country continues to be very weak (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). There is a massive unemployment among the youth, about 70 percent within the 15–29 age group, which makes up 35 percent of the population, and one out of every two female university graduates cannot find a job (Mirsepassi, 2010). Nevertheless Iran is the second largest producer in the organization of oil exporting countries after Saudi Arabia (Munzinger Online/Länder - Internationales Handbuch, 2011). Furthermore Iran is on the international news on a daily basis. Recently because of the nuclear deal and because of strong allegations from the US regarding the war in Syria. Iran is considered together with Russia as one of the main ally of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Moreover on June 7, 2017, terrorist attacks occurred in Iran for the first time, for which the Sunni terrorist militia "Islamic State" (IS) confessed afterwards (Erdbrink & Mashal, 2017). Twelve people died in two parallel attacks on the parliament building and the mausoleum (Erdbrink & Mashal, 2017).

In order to understand the artist's life and works of art in Iran, it is important to not only have the political system and the current political and economic situation in

mind but also to understand that some of these artists witnessed not only the Islamic Revolution but also the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988 and the enormous protests against the official result of the presidential elections in June 2009. The protests were very violent and gained great international attention. As soon as the state television announced the victory of President Ahmadinezhad the police clashed with supporters of the opposition candidates during the same night (Michaelsen, 2013). A few days later, hundreds of thousands of people were protesting against the fake vote in Tehran (Michaelsen, 2013). The extent of the protests seemed to surprise even the leadership of the Islamic Republic (Michaelsen, 2013). Despite the threat posed by the increasingly violent security forces, people still went to the streets, risking arrest, torture and even their lives. In the following days and weeks, a great protest movement, the so-called Green Movement, was formed, which maintained a serious challenge to the regime despite the repression (Michaelsen, 2013). International correspondents were banned by the Iranian authorities and were quickly expelled from the country (Michaelsen, 2013). Local journalists were more exposed than ever to censorship and arrest (Michaelsen, 2013). As a result, online media and social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become major sources of information which lead to the term of the Iranian "Twitter Revolution" (Michaelsen, 2013). Social Media made it possible to spread the recordings of mobile phone videos and photos which proofed the use of firearms of members of the Bassij (Michaelsen, 2013). Especially the recordings of the death of the girl Neda Agha Soltan, who was hit by a bullet in Tehran on June 20 in the demonstration, generated worldwide attention. Although she herself had not participated directly in the demonstration, Neda symbolized the young generation of Iran, which stood against arbitrariness and repression of a reckless regime and thus became an icon of the protest movement (Michaelsen, 2013). In light of the civil society and reform movement the well-known Green Movement emerged in the summer of 2009 in which the great opinion exchange in the social networks continued (Michaelsen, 2013).

4.2 Contemporary art in Iran

The artwork of Iran gets mostly connected with the architecture, the book art or the Persian textile art. Nonetheless the Western interest in Contemporary Iranian art has been rising enormously during the last years and has not stopped yet. Iranian art has been exhibited and discussed in many art exhibitions, art fairs and biennales around the world. Many Iranian artists are therefore internationally well-known and highly esteemed. Art is changing very rapidly in Iran, the same as the political and social situation of the country. Therefore my aim of this chapter is to give a short overview of the current art scene, the most prominent artists and the difficulties they have to deal with. Generally a lot of Iranian artists have to deal with censorship throughout their artistic career. The red line, especially in fine art, is hardly defined, nudity, whether male or female, unveiled women, everything vulgar and eroticism as well as critics against the political system and the government or religion is not allowed. Nevertheless the judgments are quite arbitrary (Ebrahimi, 2016). Frequently, the curators themselves make sure that the works in the exhibitions are not offensive (Ebrahimi, 2016). But many artists also censor themselves, avoid certain themes or motives or try to communicate symbolically and abstractly.

Barely a week goes by without Iran making headlines, not only about the political situation but also about the artists working in Iran: the arrest of artists, the ban on the exile of cultural workers, and a ban on dissident filmmakers and writers (Khalifa, 2016). Especially after the elections of Mahmud Ahmadinejad's in 2009 and during the period of his presidency hundreds of artists, writers, filmmakers, bloggers and journalists were arrested tortured in prisons, forced into false confessions and sentenced to severe punishment in show trials (Nirumand, 2009). The most famous example is the fate of the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, who was in 2010 sentenced to six years imprisonment and a 20-year ban on work for supporting the opposition Green Movement (Khalifa, 2016). Panahi is one of Iran's best-known international filmmakers. He received several international prizes already until 2010, like the *Golden Lion of the Venice Film*

Festival in 2000, the *Silver Bear* of the *Berlinale* in 2006, the *Golden Bear* in 2015 or the *Price for the Freedom and Future of Media* in 2015.

The reason for his sentencing was probably that he was wearing a green scarf as symbol for the green movement of hope of the Iranian opposition at the international film festival in Montreal where he was part of the Jury (Nirumand, 2009). A few weeks later the cultural minister Mohammad Hosseini explained nevertheless that Panahi wanted to make a film about the events after the controversial re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad which led to his sentencing (Nirumand, 2009, 2010). However, Panahi has not been forced to serve his sentence until today (Rezaee, 2016). His films have since been shown at festivals in Cannes and Berlin, his film *Taxi Tehran* won the 2015 *Golden Bear* (Rezaee, 2016).

In fact, art, music and literature have experienced an astonishing revival during the election campaign and in the mass demonstrations (Nirumand, 2010). Especially since then many artists critically examine gender roles and raise doubts about Islamic identity (Khalifa, 2016). Therefore the government tries to allow as few artistic activities as possible (Khalifa, 2016). They prevent concerts, censor films and the few international collaborations are constantly monitored (Khalifa, 2016). An unfiltered exchange can only take place in private circles (Khalifa, 2016). Therefore the government is definitely aware of the fact that artists can have a great impact on the society. In 2010 the Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Leadership, Jawad Shamghadri, introduced a new system for the filmmakers (Nirumand, 2010). Filmmakers should only produce films that are based on faith and Islamic morality, that express the content of the Koran and tell the "glorious history of Islam" (Nirumand, 2010). Politically, they should educate the people about the staging of a "gentle war" by foreign powers, the fight against imperialism and the "holy resistance of the Muslims" (Nirumand, 2010). Furthermore who is allowed to be a filmmaker should be decided by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Leadership who will give the permission to licenses for filmmakers (Nirumand, 2010). There should be four categories for filmmakers in the future (Nirumand, 2010). In the first category the filmmakers are allowed to produce three films per year, in the second only two films and in the

third category only one film per year (Nirumand, 2010). The rest, who usually produce socially political critical films should not be allowed to produce any films at all (Nirumand, 2010). The system however has not really been implemented to this day. In March 2010 forty filmmakers and writers demanded in an open letter the immediate release of their colleagues from prison (Nirumand, 2010). It is part of the legal rights of every artist and author to practice his profession and express his opinion freely, the letter says (Nirumand, 2010). However, the denial of these rights in Iran has driven many writers, artists and journalists especially since 2009 into exile or made them publish their work only abroad and not in Iran anymore. Nevertheless many artists and writers have been even banned from leaving the country which makes the situation for them even more difficult (Nirumand, 2010). This also refrains Iranian artists working or living abroad from traveling to Iran even if they are not politically persecuted there (Khalifa, 2016).

After the change of power in 2013 some changes could be seen in the art field in Iran. For instance the play *The Portrait of the Broken Man* by Barseghian and Gholamhossein Dolotbadi did not receive a publication permit in 2012 but came quickly on stage in the *Sangeladj Theatre* in Tehran in 2013 (Rezaee, 2016). Nevertheless a lot of artists still had to deal with sentencing because of their work. Another well-known example is the sentencing in October 2015 of the filmmaker Keywan Karimi who was sentenced for alleged anti-Iran propaganda to six years imprisonment and 223 lashes (Rezaee, 2016). He was spared the penalty so far and also experienced like Panahi international solidarity of colleagues, film festivals and human rights organizations (Rezaee, 2016). At the beginning of September 2016, the *Venice Film Festival* presented his feature film debut *Drum* (Rezaee, 2016). How inscrutable the censorship mechanisms can be, another filmmaker Reza Dormishian has been experiencing for years (Rezaee, 2016). His film *I'm Not Angry* about the rage of a youth without a future, which was presented at the *Berlinale* in 2014, was banned three days before the theatrical release in Iran (Rezaee, 2016).

According to an interview at the German newspaper *Zeit* from 2016 the Iranian filmmaker Ida Panahandeh believes that Iranian artists have for a while been able to be freer with their artworks (Nicodemus, 2016). She feels that the regime is

slowly making its peace with the artists (Nicodemus, 2016). Her movie *Nahid* was in her opinion only one example of the change in Iran (Nicodemus, 2016). Her movie is for instance about a divorced wife who has an affair with a man but refuses to get the marriage on time with him (Nicodemus, 2016). Further she is fighting with her ex-husband for the custody of her son and with her affair about her right of independence (Nicodemus, 2016). Only a few years earlier a film content like *Nahid* would have not made it into Iran's cinemas (Nicodemus, 2016). In 2016, however, *Nahid* gained great success in Iran (Nicodemus, 2016). Ida Panahandeh says in the interview that she sees her life and the life of her female friends like the one of the protagonist of the movie (Nicodemus, 2016). They do not want to live only in the role of a mother and housewife, Ida for instance does not want to have children at all, instead she wants to make movies (Nicodemus, 2016). In her opinion the eight years with Ahmadinedschad were worse than the times of the Iran-Irak war, it was a retrograde step in social as well as in political terms but in 2016 she felt like the Iranian society was slowly awakening (Nicodemus, 2016).

Nonetheless in the same year one of Tehran's most famous curators, Lili Golestan, wrote in a letter to Iranian President Hassan Rohana that "the artists are tired, weak, disappointed and dead tired" (Ebrahimi, 2016). She scourges the censorship of books, films, concerts, and in particular that Parviz Tanavoli, one of the pioneers of contemporary sculpture, who was officially forbidden to travel (Ebrahimi, 2016). Her open letter appeared on July 11, 2016 in the daily newspaper *Schargh* (Ebrahimi, 2016). It is therefore not certain if there is in general a change for the Iranian artists or not.

One of the greatest issues that filmmakers in Iran have to deal with is however the fact that many cinemas belong to a state conservative organization and do not want to show critical films (Rezaee, 2016). Therefore independent filmmakers depend on private cinemas, which often take great risks (Rezaee, 2016). Furthermore the filmmaker Reza Dormishian points out that liberalization in Iran can only have a positive impact on the film industry if the economic situation for people improves and if they can afford a movie ticket which is for many people not yet the case (Rezaee, 2016).

Regarding the art galleries in Iran most of them are only in Tehran, the few galleries outside of the capital are facing great social and financial difficulties (Jacobi, 2017). Since the so-called Green Revolution the private galleries were growing and a lot of young artists, especially women, entered the art scene (Diba, n.d.). Consequently more and more galleries were formed to represent these artists and to encourage visitors to turn into collectors (Diba, n.d.). Slowly Iranian contemporary art was re-emerging (Diba, n.d.). The art historian Hannah Jacobi is of the opinion that the expansion of the contemporary art scene in Iran can also be explained by the economic development of the recent years (Jacobi, 2017). Iranian journalist Sohrab Mahdavi speaks of a neo-liberal push fuelled by profitable foreign exchange and oil transactions (Jacobi, 2017). However according to the graphic designer Farid Hamedi there are still not even ten active galleries in Tehran even though there are approximately 700-800 painters ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015). The art critic Mehran Norusi claims on the other hand that also because of the economic problems the exhibitions usually have only a few visitors ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015).

In April of 2001, the *Barbican Centre* in London organized a group show of Iranian artists, under the care of Rose Issa, and with the collaboration of the *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA)*, under the supervision of Alireza Sami-Azar, the then director of the Museum (Diba, n.d.). The curator Negui Diba claims in 2017 that since the Barbican event, Persian artists were never again absent from the international art scene (Diba, n.d.). On the contrary, they started being more and more visible in London, Paris or elsewhere, either in galleries and institutions or at Biennales (Diba, n.d.). During the last decade for the first time many Iranian galleries outside of Iran focused on their country's art and courageously tried to promote their artists (Diba, n.d.). At the same time, some European and New York galleries started representing the more internationally renowned artists (Diba, n.d.). In January 2009, the second event of the *Saatchi Gallery* in London since its opening a year before, was titled *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (Diba, n.d.). It featured, among others, 11 Persian artists all from a new generation of young men and women (Diba, n.d.). This event was a

prologue to a row of commercial group shows in private galleries like for instance at *Thaddaeus Ropac*, *Ghislaine Hussenot* or at the *Almine Rech Gallery* (Diba, n.d.). Most exhibitions in Western societies with Iranian artists have a clear political undertone. For instance in the show at *Almine Rech* in Paris in 2009 where ten Iranian artists exhibited their work, most artists criticized the government indirectly and avoided open confrontation (Heinick, 2009). One of the artists Mandana Moghadam said in 2009 in an interview with the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Millions of people risk their lives because they want more freedom. It can only get worse or better" (Heinick, 2009). For her like for so many Iranian artists everyday life and politics are so closely interwoven that both are reflected in her work (Heinick, 2009). In general the Iranian art is often becoming a way to express one's own feelings and thoughts, especially for the younger generation of artists. The founder of the Iranian *Silk Road Gallery* Anahita Ghabaian said in an interview in January 2017 with the German radio *Deutschlandfunkkultur*: "The Iranian photography is so exciting because it always deals with the reality, with the society, with the youth and many current topics" (Frenzel, 2017). The film director, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad said in her interview with the German Newspaper *Zeit* in 2016: "Since almost forty years we are forced to hide everything, our thoughts, our hair, our body, alcohol, sex, whatever and one day I started to show the Invisible" (Nicodemus, 2016). She made for instance five critical short films to avoid the censorship of feature films but afterwards put them all together into a movie with different episodes under the name *Tales*. The movie was shown at the *Venice festival* in 2014 and won the *Award for Best Screenplay* (Rothe, 2014). Also the works of the artists in exile still show a great Iranian influence since many artists certainly still feel a bond to their home country. In the artist's Simin Keramati's opinion Iranian art has an influence from the West and from other parts of the world but the Iranian origin is usually unmistakable (Nirumand, 2009). The struggle of Iranians between tradition and modernity, especially for women, is what many artists express in their artwork: "For many works of art one has the feeling that the artist wants to scream out the social problems that are burning on his nails. The bright colors, which are often used, are evidence of inner restlessness, anger and pain."

(Nirumand, 2009). However she sees that things have changed already, since women for instance have conquered many areas including the art world (Nirumand, 2009). This special connection between the examination of cultural identities and artistic techniques gave the artists a lot of attention at art fairs and made some international renown, as for the artists Shirin Neshat, Marjane Satrapi and Parastou Forouhar (Khalifa, 2016).

At the same time Iran owns the largest collection of contemporary Western art outside of Europe and the United States (Khalifa, 2016). In the 1970s, the *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA)* was run by Farah Diba, the last empress of Iran, with works ranging from Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí to Francis Bacon ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015; Khalifa, 2016). Even Andy Warhol visited Tehran in the mid-1970s ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015). Farah Diba had the great goal to turn the country into an art metropolis in the Middle East ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015). In 1977, it was solemnly opened to be closed again with the 1979 revolution (Khalifa, 2016). All artworks were firstly stored in damp cellars and from the late 90s finally professional stored in the museum ("Kunst und Zensur im Iran. Kultur als Brücke zur Welt," 2015). In the late 1990s, during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, the museum which was led by architect and art historian Alireza Sami Azar, became a platform for young, contemporary art in Iran (Jacobi, 2017). Today, however, the museum no longer has much significance for the local art scene (Jacobi, 2017). As the director is appointed by the Minister of Culture, the orientation of the museum changes with every political change (Jacobi, 2017). Since the so-called Green Revolution most artists and gallery owners are no longer in contact with the museum (Jacobi, 2017).

This was supposed to change in 2016/2017 (Khalifa, 2016). The *Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation* in Berlin in collaboration with the *National Museum of XXI Secolo Art* in Rome (*MAXXI*), had begun to bring the collection of the *Tehran Museum* from the Catacombs back to light (Khalifa, 2016). 60 works should be made accessible to Western museums (Khalifa, 2016). However, the idea met with little enthusiasm in Iran on all sides (Khalifa, 2016). They found it

unfair that people in Europe should be allowed to see what Iranians had been denied for so long (Khalifa, 2016). Therefore the *Goethe Institute* with the support of the *Iranian cultural association Dekhoda* from Berlin organised a supporting program under the title *Iranian Modernity* for the planned exhibition *Tehran Collection* where artists, writers and musicians from Iran should be invited to and to give them the opportunity to conquer a new audience (Khalifa, 2016). The Director of the Department of Media and Communication of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Ingolf Kern, said to Iran Journal in 2016:

"We are committed to cultural exchange with partners in countries that have different standards than we do. If we do not try to reach out to difficult governments and thereby strengthen civil societies and liberal forces in the respective countries, if we only want to pursue cultural policy with our neighbouring countries, then we have not understood the current global challenges." (Khalifa, 2016).

Nonetheless in the end the exhibition in Berlin had to be cancelled due to missing export licenses for the artworks ("Parzinger: Teheran-Ausstellung ein positives Zeichen," 2017). They were however shown in Teheran. Hermann Parzinger, President of the *Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation* in Berlin said in 2017:

"If the works are now presented in Teheran after long discussions about the exhibition, then that is a positive sign for a more open attitude in Iran. It confirms that collaborations like these are not always easy but still rewarding and part of a larger process. We are still interested in continuing the cultural dialogue with Tehran. The doors in Berlin remain open." ("Parzinger: Teheran-Ausstellung ein positives Zeichen," 2017).

The events surrounding the exhibition in Berlin demonstrate that there are still great difficulties in working as a cultural institute or as an artist together with Iran, but they also give a significant signal that it is nonetheless of great importance and that efforts like these eventually contribute to an opening of the country. Ultimately, there are always two sides forming the Iranian society, the reformers and the conservatives, and therefore the politics in Iran are so closely interwoven with the Iranian art scene, thus art in Iran cannot be reflected and analysed without the political and social situation in Iran in mind.

4.3 The expression of provocation in art in Iran

When talking about provocation of Iranian artists living and working in Iran I want to start this chapter with a work of Morteza Ahmadvand whose three-minute video work *Flight* demonstrates not only the situation of Iranians in their country but also shows how provocation can work in a subtle matter so as to not even be able to detect it as a provocation.

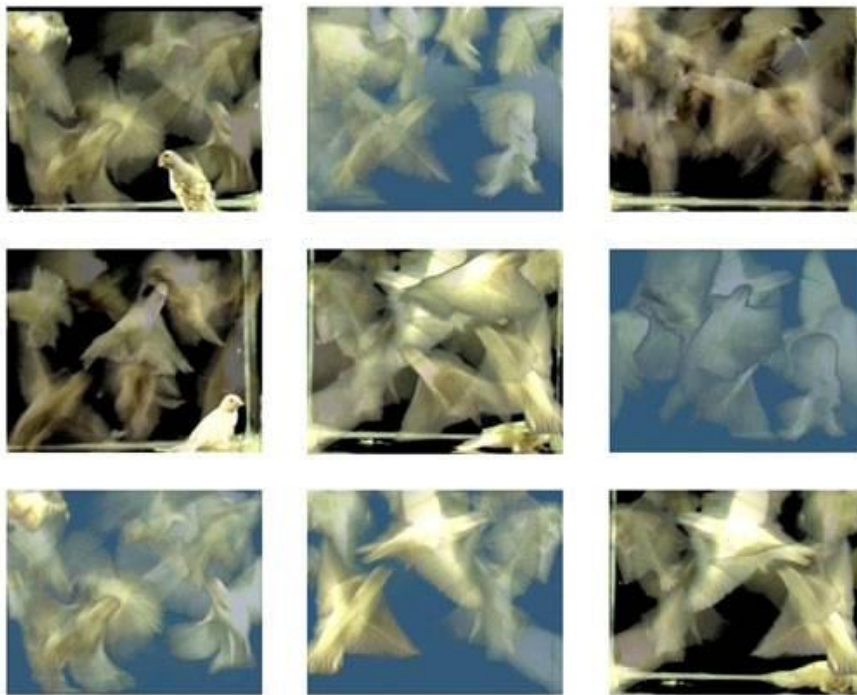


Image 19: Ahmadvand, Morteza: *Flight*, 2008.

In several screens the artist presents pigeons which are trying to fly away. Nothing of his artwork exceed the guidelines by the Iranian government, though it seems that the pigeons are symbolising something bigger, presumably the Iranian people longing for freedom. The work appears as a beautiful image on the first view but on closer examination it certainly reveals a critique at the Iranian regime and speaks about the suppression of the Iranian people. It is artworks like these that make the provocation inside Iran so highly interesting.

In this chapter I am going to closer analyse the two artists Shadi Ghadirian and Simin Keramati, who both grew up and exhibit their artwork in Iran as well as

internationally. The interviews I made with these artists can be found at the end of the chapter. I try to understand the way these artists provoke with their artwork and to see if there is a special hidden language of provocation in their work. Certainly there are many popular provocative Iranian artists to choose from like for instance Shirin Fakhim and her prostitute sculptures, Farhad Moshiri's provocative sculptures with knives or Abbas Kowsari who is working with the topic of Masculinity. It seems like most of Iranian artists have a provocative tone in their artworks, at least a hidden one. Nonetheless, I chose these two artists as I believe that their work has a deep provocative meaning but still fits into the "guidelines" of censored art and can therefore be shown in Iranian art institutions and galleries and thus make the question of provocation so exceedingly interesting.

To begin with Shadi Ghadirian who is known as one of Iran's most popular contemporary and one of its few renowned female photographers. Shadi Ghadirian was born in 1974 in Tehran where she still lives and works until today (Schmidtner). In 1998 she received her Bachelor in Photography at the *Azad University* in Tehran. Next to her artistic career she worked for the Museum for Photography in Tehran, an advertising company, an Iranian youth Magazine, the *Mahtab Magazine*, and gave courses in photography at various Institutes in Tehran (Schmidtner). She became internationally known for her photo series where she questioned the role of the women in Iran like for instance in the *Qajar* or in the *Like Every Day* series (Schmidtner). Until today she has produced nine photo series and one video work in year 2015. Shadi Ghadirian exhibited worldwide, among others in London, Copenhagen, Berlin, Toronto, Paris or New York. Her work is mostly about her life and her home. Home for her is Tehran which she does not plan to leave anytime soon unlike so many other Iranians artists who have gone abroad in search of more artistic freedom (Ghadirian, 2012). She always takes her photos inside houses: "My series is exactly a mirror of my life and other women like me – my sisters, my friends, the women who live in this country" (Ghadirian, 2012)

In her first photography series, the *Untitled Qajar series*, from 1998, she reimagined the traditional Iranian portraiture of the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) in Iran with thirty three portraits (LACMA).



Image 20: Ghadirian, Shadi: Qajar #3, 1998.



Image 21: Ghadirian, Shadi: Qajar #24, 1998.

The difference to the traditional portrays is that in her photos the veiled women, which were her sisters, friends or neighbours, carry 20th century objects like boom boxes, vacuum cleaners or a can of Pepsi. For her portrays Shadi Ghadirian used

the period costumes, the typical backdrop and the characteristic visual tonalities of the mid to late 19th century. All of her portraits are exclusively of women, either one woman alone or two women together. The gaze of the portrayed women is always confrontational with two exceptions, one where a woman is painting the backdrop and another portray where a woman wears black sunglasses and does not look straight into the camera. All portrayed women are either sitting on the floor, a chair or are standing. There are two different backgrounds which look like two different parts of one backdrop. The image of the women vary from photo to photo but despite of all wearing headscarves many of them also wear short skirts over baggy trousers and their faces show thick black eyebrows. In one photo there is a child sitting in contemporary clothes in front of a woman with the typical clothes from the Qajar dynasty. The inserted objects in the portrays are ranging from a vacuum cleaner to a newspaper, a bicycle, a telephone, a boom box, a mirror, a guitar, an umbrella, sunglasses or old and recent photography material. The most famous portrait is probably the photo with the boom box followed by the one with the vacuum cleaner and the one with the Pepsi can. The reason for their popularity is certainly because the contrast of tradition and modernity is very apparent in these portraits.

The author Elen Feldman of *Photography. Foreign Objects* from 2010 describes the poses of the women as “contemporary” and the objects that Ghadirian placed in the portraits as “foreign objects” (Feldman & Ghadirian, 2010). Feldman goes further to say that “with the everyday objects in this studio setting a clash of epochs and of realities was created [...] [and that her work] develops the irony that come from being a modern artist in a repressive culture” (Feldman & Ghadirian, 2010). Shadi Ghadirian said about her work: "My pictures became a mirror reflecting how I felt: we are stuck between tradition and modernity" (LACMA). One of the photos even won the first prize in a juried show (Ghadirian, 2012). Unfortunately the Ministry of Culture banned Ghadirian from the competition with the reason that she was representing “veiled women as limited and restrained” (Ghadirian, 2012). Her provoking series on Iranian female identity was described by Shadi Ghadirian as a depicting women’s acts “of rebellion, of subtlety, of changes forseen” (Isaa, 2009).

In her following photography series *Like Every Day* from 2000 the faces of women are replaced with domestic appliances like a teapot, a frying pan, an iron or a broom.



Image 22: Ghadirian, Shadi: *Like Every Day* #2, 2000.

Even though one does not see anything related to a woman in these photos since there is not a single bit of the face to be seen, one can only identify them as women because of their clothes. The women are dressed in vibrant chadors in front of white backgrounds and they “appear as faceless subjects whose identity has become a domestic object” (Isaa, 2009). These series certainly deal with the question of gender and the role of women. Shadi Ghadirian says about the series: “[A] Woman is forced to cater to the wishes and desire of “others” to such an extent that sometimes she doesn’t even have a face of her own to uphold” (Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu).

In her series *West by East* from 2004 the artist portrays women dressed in Western clothes like short dresses, skirts, tank tops and high heels whose poses

look like the typical poses from Western women magazines. The only difference is that all the body parts that Iranian women are not allowed to show in public like the hair, the legs, the arms, the belly, the décolleté are censored with a black marker.



Image 23: Ghadirian, Shadi: West by East #1, 2004.

The last women of the series is completely censored except of her eyes.

Shadi Ghadirian comments the series the following:

“When I was five my country went through a major political and social upheaval. Soon the hejab was codified in our Constitution. For many years now, whether in public or in the mass media, Iranian women have had to cover themselves according to a different legal code than men. Images of women in foreign magazines that were distributed inside Iran were also treated in the same way; this time covered with ink coming from those authorities in charge of making sure the public is protected from harms issued from the body of women. When I majored in photography in the university I paid attention to this censorship from a technical, aesthetic point of view. Today the Internet has made the issue moot. In *West by East* I wanted to present a look at censorship through an aesthetic evaluation” (Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu).

Her photo series *Nil Nil* from 2008 means translated “nothing nothing”, which for Elen Feldman means the extended version from nothing to nihilism to denial (Feldman & Ghadirian, 2010). In the *Nil Nil* series glamorous and elegant still lifes are inserted with objects of war like a knife, a bullet or a grenade.



Image 24: Ghadirian, Shadi: Nil Nil #9, 2008.



Image 25: Ghadirian, Shadi: Nil Nil #16, 2008.

The objects seem to fit very well in the still life setting and are not very obvious on the first view. In one of the photos a room of a child is captured. One can see a high shelf full of stuffed animals on the right side which is the centre of attention, left of it is a commode with toys and stuffed animals on top of it, more toys are on the floor on a colourful, flowery carpet and the walls have colourful flowers painted on them as well. On the first view the colourful bright room appears to belong to a joyful young child, on the second view however the observer can see a gasmask hanging down on the left side of the shelf. The contrast between the toys that one connects to an innocent child and the gasmask that one connects to brutal war scenes is very intriguing but shocking. Other photos show for instance a fruit bowl where one fruit is replaced by a grenade, a cigarette box where one cigarette is replaced by a bullet, military boots placed next to red high heels or a laid table where the dinner knife is replaced by a big knife covered in blood.

Elen Feldman commented the series as the following: "The photos create visual metaphors for absence – of the war and violence that make no appearance in our daily lives, and that we keep at more than arm's length. Ghadirian gives the lie to our self-deceptions" (Feldman & Ghadirian, 2010). Shadi Ghadirian explained that she got the idea for this work while listening to her neighbour's radio when John Lennon's *Imagine* was on: "I had to find the images for these words" (Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu). In another interview with *Muslima* she says:

"In the Nil, Nil series you can see another point of view on war. In the image with the pumps, I want to show everyday life and war simultaneously. I wanted to show how war is reflected inside the home – what happens to the other members of the family who stayed at home and are now waiting. I also wanted to show what life is like when somebody comes back from war, and that many things change after war" (Muslima. Muslim Women's Art & Voices).

Shadi Ghadirian's photography critically shows the contradictions that exist in Iran's everyday life, may it be the mixture of tradition and modernity, the role of women as housewives, the laws that tell women how to dress, the stereotypes about Iranian women or the cruelty of war that continues to live in families homes even if the war itself is over or far away. Ghadirian sees her work as a mirror of her life, displaying what she and her friends experience. Nevertheless her artwork

is provoking. She wants not only the Iranian women to identify with her work but also to raise an awareness of the social issues that they have to face in their lives. (see interview on page 87-90). Her provocation is so clear but yet so hidden that Shadi Ghadirian has never had to face censorship or any great consequences for her work (see interview on page 87-90). It seems like she is absolutely aware of the red lines and knows how to creatively work around them without touching the forbidden topics. On the same time the contrast and contradictions in her photo series are so significant and explicit that one cannot speak of anything else than shocking and provoking. For her it is absolutely important to continue to work in Iran (see interview on page 87-90) and to display her work first in Tehran before exhibiting it abroad: "My first viewers are always Iranian because I show my work first in Iran and then abroad. Normally Iranians can understand my stories because these are their stories too. I believe that I am [a] story teller. I just want to show a part of reality" (Muslima. Muslim Women's Art & Voices). Nevertheless Shadi Ghadirian wants to make sure that the provocation of displaying issues as a Muslim woman from Iran is not the aim of her work: "When I am working, I don't think, 'I am a woman and I am Muslim, so what should I do?' If you can tell that I am Muslim from my art it is because my identity is in my art, and this happens naturally" (Muslima. Muslim Women's Art & Voices). Ghadirian's provocation arises more likely from her will to raise an awareness about social issues that she, her family and friends experience day by day. This provocation is very hidden but on the same time so apparent and that is maybe one of the main reasons why her artwork is so particularly intriguing.

Another artist that I want to further examine is Simin Keramati who was born in 1970 in Tehran, Iran. In 2012 she moved to Toronto, Canada for private reasons where she still works and lives today (Bahadur, 2018). I examine Simin Keramati in the chapter of artists living in Iran because she used to live and work in Tehran while becoming worldwide known and is even today still working regularly in Iran (Bahadur, 2018). Simin completed her M.A. in Fine Arts at the *Art University of Tehran* in 1996 and is a member of the board of Art Science at the *University of Azad* in Tehran. Before moving to Canada, she was also teaching at the *Faculty of Fine Arts* at the *Azad University*. She was selected as the best artist at the *11th*

Asia Art Biennale and she was also the winner of the *Grand prize* from the *Dhaka international Biennale* in 2004. Furthermore she was nominated for the *2009 Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize* and also received a Grant from the *Canadian Council for Arts* in 2015 to produce video art and a short film. Her artworks include paintings, drawings, video arts as well as new media, and they mostly deal with social and political themes which are sometimes more and sometimes less obviously visible for the observer. Simin Keramati can look back to an enormous amount of international solo and group exhibitions from 1993 until today. She exhibited her work among other places in the USA, France, Sweden, Austria, Germany, China, India or Turkey and therefore gained international high recognition and success. A repeatedly appearing image among her works are women and self-portraits.

Simin Keramati is known for topics that are personal but also social political. Her work appears fragile and melancholic and since she moved to Toronto also deal a lot with the question of identity. She says in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* in 2009 that she draws her ideas and themes not from the critical consideration of the processes in the country than rather from what takes place in herself, what she feels and experiences (Nirumand, 2009). The social and political themes that she has been focusing on are among others the serial killing of Iranian writers, the Iran-Iraq war, the Middle East and the so called "Arab spring", capital punishment, women's rights, children's rights, air pollution or immigration (Bahadur, 2018).

In one of her early video works *Rising up or Falling down* from 2002 Simin Keramati displayed the artwork on two screens in a small dark room. One screen shows the upper part of a well and the other screen the lower part of the well. On the lower part of the well one can look down on a woman who is stuck in a dark well and cries for help. Her surrounding is completely black one only knows it is a well because of the other screen. The woman is dressed in a blue long tunic and her black hair is covered half way with a white scarf. She stretches her arm out to the sky where the camera is positioned and jumps up in order to get out. She is constantly asking for help. The other screen shows the upper part of the well with a woman looking down. In her background one can see nothing but the

blue sky. She wears black clothing and a white scarf around her hair and tries to reach the person who is stuck in the well. She stretches her arm down where the camera is positioned and supports her with word like “Come on” or “Jump”. In some moments the woman is looking around as if she is looking for help but apparently she cannot see anyone. At the end of the scene she slowly disappears and one is left alone with the crying of the woman in the well.



Image 26: Keramati, Simin: Rising up or Falling Down, 2002.

The artist explains in an interview about the video setting: “This is fixed in a small room as I wanted the audience to feel the darkness of the well and the helplessness and bitterness of being lonely and lost” (Haq, 2004). There are numerous ways to interpret and analyse the video work of Simin Keramati. Certainly she wanted to show the helplessness and the feeling of being stuck in a place with no escape. This feeling fits to the described feeling of many Iranian women who are stuck in their role as house wives and the isolation so many feel. In her video work *Earth* from 2006 which is part of her work *The Four Elements* Simin Keramati shows herself barefoot dressed in black clothes with her hair covered in a black turban sitting on the floor while orange red sand is falling down on her. The video lasts for approximately fifteen minutes until one cannot see her anymore. She appears tired and resigned. There is no hope in her eyes or any approach to try to flee from the situation. It seems like she gave up as if she knows there is no escape.



Image 27: Keramati, Simin: *Earth*, 2016.



Image 28: Keramati, Simin: Earth, 2016.



Image 29: Keramati, Simin: Earth, 2016.

The artist says in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*:

“I am a woman who grew up in a male-dominated oriental Islamic society and had to constantly deal with traditional structures both in private and in public. My dreams, my ideals and my needs constantly come into conflict with these structures. I have to resist. Sometimes I succeed and I am happy, then again I fall into a hole and I am resigned. My penultimate work is a self-portrait that slowly dissolves into nothing. Or a video work by me shows how I buried myself alive. [...] It was an expression of anger and protest. I wanted to show that I and my kind are undesirable in this society. Although we resist, but most would like to hide us in the house behind the stove” (Nirumand, 2009).

In her painting series *Insomnia* from 2010 Simin Keramati portrays sleepless women sitting in their bed with bed sheets covering their faces and their hands in their hair.



Image 30: Keramati, Simin: *Insomnia* Paintings, 2010.



Image 31: Keramati, Simin: *Insomnia* Paintings, 2010.



Image 32: Keramati, Simin: *Insomnia Paintings*, 2010.

The bed sheets look colourful and have geometric pattern, some have doves which in some cases appear like they are flying around the women. The way these women are sitting with their hands in their hair makes them look depressed and in great despair. The colourful patterns and the doves mark a striking contrast. In the video work of the same year under the same name one can see a window of the artist's bedroom with white curtains moving in the wind. Furthermore one can hear the sound of a city in the morning. For this artwork Simin Keramati used monologues from the book *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf as subtitles. According to the artist the *Insomnia* series is about the aftermath of the presidential election in 2009 in Iran when a lot of her close friends went to prison and many activists got even killed (Bahadur, 2018). She further explains: "I mean who could sleep under those circumstances? I can never forget those sleepless nights, thinking and staring deep into nowhere" (Bahadur, 2018).

In her work *Biopsy of a close memory* from 2012 the artist is wearing white clothes and a white hijab which is covering her hair. Only her upper part of the body is visible and she is watching frontal into the camera. In the beginning the screen is turning red for a short time until one can see the artist sitting in front of a bright white background. During the video red paint is being slashed over and over again at her face from the right side. One cannot see where exactly the red paint is coming from but it covers almost her whole face which she turns slightly to the side with each hit.



Image 33: Keramati, Simin: Biopsy Of A Close Memory, 2012.



Image 34: Keramati, Simin: Biopsy Of A Close Memory, 2012.

The artist does not appear as if she tries to escape the situation rather than as a victim of the whole act itself. At the end of the video she closes her eyes and becomes one with the again red turning screen. On the artist's website she explains the work as the following:

“It is all about war and massacre that happens in the war. War between nations, countries, religions and ideologies...Ever since my childhood I have witnessed so many wars on the news. Watching all these news we all have witnessed wars, the war between Iran and Iraq, the massacre on the streets of Tehran in 2009, the massacre of Balkan, the war of Bosnia and Serbia, the massacre in Somalia, the massacre in Afghanistan, in Iraq, the massacre in Syria. Sadly the massacre in Syria is still going on. The

Video.art is a biopsy of the massacres we've witnessed on the news, all the blood that has coloured the history of war" (Keramati).

Simin Keramati moved to Toronto, Canada in 2012 where she continues to work until today even though she regularly visits and works in Iran (see interview page 90-93). One difference that I can notice in comparison to her recent works is that since she is living in Canada she is showing her hair in her video works without covering it. Apart of that her artworks still provoke but not as one might think in a more noticeable way but rather still in the same hidden provocative language with which she used to work before. In an interview I had with her in May 2018 she talked about the difficulties one has to deal with while moving to a different place and that one still takes its background and past with it. In her opinion her work therefore did not change that much:

"Mainly the themes that I choose are still the same, but my approach to them is from a wider angle and point of view. For instance in the video art, 'The painless method' I am criticizing the capital punishment and although I did this for the cause of hanging two young thieves in Iran (in public) at that time, but my main target in the whole video art is not limited to Iran" (see interview page 90-93)

However I noticed that since she moved to Toronto many of her works deal with the question of identity as for instance *I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist* from 2014.



Image 35: Keramati, Simin: *I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist*, 2014.



Image 35: Keramati, Simin: I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist, 2014.



Image 35: Keramati, Simin: I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist, 2014.



Image 35: Keramati, Simin: I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist, 2014.

In the video work the artist is displayed in front of a white background while her nose is bleeding. She has a plait of hair and dark eyeliner around her eyes, red colour is running down of her nose, her shoulders and décolleté are naked. She appears sad and depressed, in some parts her eyes are filled with tears. Later in the video she starts smoking a cigarette and ends with holding her nose with her hand. Her work should display that people are seeing in her usually an artist living in exile even though her relocation to Toronto was voluntary and not forced (Bahadur, 2018). In the interview I had with the artist in May 2018 she stated:

“I have always represented my Iranian originality in my art work, I will always do so. But if you are talking about some visual codes and pictures that are introduced as the symbol of a society, no I do not follow those codes. Instead I break all those codes. Let me be clearer, a bearded man, a woman wearing black chador, a mosque and other related images have been recognized as the Iranian codes. But that is not true. As you may say all Americans are not cowboys, and not all African Americans are Jazz and blues musicians, or not all the Jews wear hats. I have a strong objection to the way that the society looks at me, their prejudgments and the codes that they have made in order to recognize me as some exotic product of the Middle East. In this video I am exposing my pain, the history of my life and my very deep frustration of being judged by the facts that mostly are not even adequate” (see interview page 90-93).

What I find so exceedingly interesting in Simin Keramati's works is her hidden way of provoking but on the same time provoking and saying so much. One needs to firstly former analyse her work before gaining awareness of how deep the meaning is and yet is her artistic language not too hidden. About her role as an artist she says: “As a contemporary artist, my role is to talk about breaking the rules and rejecting the prejudgments, frames and clichés” (Bahadur, 2018). Regarding the hidden provocative language in Iranian artworks in general the artist further explains: “The more scrutinized and covert a criticism is voiced, the greater the chance of surviving the censorship. In this regard, we look back on a century-long tradition in Iran. The old great poets of Iran have always used such method in their resistance to the prevailing despotism” (Nirumand, 2009). It seems like Simin Keramati learned to perfectly use to covert her criticism in her words but still provoke on the same time, not too much but yet enough. In conclusion Iranian artists living and working in Iran, despite of their fear of consequences that they are all aware of, still provoke in order to raise an

awareness of social and political issues of the country. Even though they have to deal with censorship they know how to adapt their work to the given “guidelines” and still break norms and rules on the same time. None of their work is however too scandalous as it certainly is impossible to be too scandalous without consequences, it nevertheless always stays on a level of being not too much but not too little provocative and therefore not only reach attention in Iran but also from the international art scene.

4.3.1 Interviews with Iranian artists

Interview with Shadi Ghadirian, May 09, 2018

“When I talk about my country I should be here and deal with all the things from inside”

I read that you see some of your work as a mirror of your life. Your work contains a mixture of tradition and modernity. Is this how you see your life in Iran? Can you explain that a bit more?

Actually I talked about the modernity and the tradition in the Qajar series in 1998. It was the time that I just graduated from the University and I finished my thesis with this topic. It was the time that I was young and the time that I wanted to find a job and decided what I wanted to do as a photographer or as an artist. And I noticed that in Iran you have the traditional theme and we also accept the modernity that came from out of the country and I should combine these two issues together and we continue living like this. It was very nice for me that we still kept our traditions and also we accept the modernism.

Women keep repeating in your photographs. Are there specific motives for it, why is it important for you?

Actually in the first series it was somehow by accident because as I told you the Qajar series was for my thesis and I was a student in the University and I didn't have a professional atelier and I couldn't use professional models and therefore I used my sisters my cousins and my friends. After that I started to work for NGOs, for feminist NGOs, and I got inspired and for several years something

like for ten years I was very active in this issue and I chose women as a subject. Not now I think but that time I was totally influenced by the feminism activities.

Many Iranian artists try to avoid censorship with a hidden artistic language like abstract paintings, with photography I think it is more difficult. When and why did you chose photography as your medium to work with?

The first reason I think I am not very good in writing or having a lecture or something like that. I think to tell a story through the art and I think then it is harder, then the art has the different layer. You can talk about something that maybe you cannot tell it directly but through art you can do it. Especially for some countries like Iran, we have some deadlines so the artists they try to talk about the different issues.

You are internationally known. Is there a difference between the work you show abroad and the work you show in Iran?

Of course. Fortunately I had many exhibitions in different countries. I had exhibitions for example in China where the exhibition is read differently than if I show my work in Italy or in the USA. Of course you have people with different background, different culture and different artwork. Yes it was totally natural.

Is it difficult to get your work to different countries? Is the censorship of Iran then still a topic or do you have more freedom if you exhibit your work abroad?

No there is no problem I always show my work. My first exhibition always was in Iran in a gallery but no there is no limit I was always free to show my work in galleries or biennales.

Did you ever had to deal with consequences for your works or was your work not allowed to be displayed?

No never.

I read that there was one photograph of your first series that you won a price for but then it was banned from the competition?

Yes it was a competition for photography and it was for a book fair in Tehran. That was because the photography that I had done was not very common because mostly because of the revolution and what has happened in Iran in photo journalism and documentary photography. And art photography was very new and nobody knew about this it was the first time that somebody do

something like photography as artwork and it was the reason that the people from that competition couldn't realise it and were very afraid to accept it.

More and more Iranian artists are living and working outside of Iran. Did you ever think about leaving Iran in order to work with less restrictions?

No actually because I totally inspire Iran more than other countries. I travelled a lot and I had some residencies and some opportunities to live outside of Iran but I really love my country and I want to live here and continue living here but when I talk about my country I should be here and deal with all the things from inside and this is very important for me.

Do you think it is important in general that artists continue to stay in Iran and that artists in Iran have an influence on the Iranian society?

It depends on the artist. I cannot say that. This is the thing that I chose. I cannot say this is the right way. For me it was right but in art you cannot discover and talk about other places when you don't live there and experience it, how you want to talk about it?

Yes, I understand. Do you consider yourself a provocative artist in terms that you try to break rules or norms with your artwork in order to raise awareness for a social and political issue?

Mostly social issues. Actually I never provoke because I totally know how I can work and how I can talk about the things. In my work you can see the social theme not political. Actually I think that all of art all of people in the world they have some political mind but for me the social issue is more important.

How do you see the current situation of the art scene in Iran and has there been a change during the last years?

Yes of course during these years there have been many many changes. The number of the galleries that they made now in Tehran and the number of the artists and the number of the exhibitions of students of art universities show that we have a powerful art in cinema and in photography. And we are in most of the festivals. And yes many things change. And of course we have many hope and maybe in the future the things get better.

Yes there is a big international interest in Iran and I feel it is getting more and more.

Yes Iran is everywhere in the news so people are curious to see how is art in Iran now.

Thank you so much for this interesting interview.

Interview with Simin Keramati, May 13, 2018

“The artist is capable of being a mirror of the society”

You used to live and work in Tehran in Iran before moving to Toronto in Canada in 2012. It is known that many topics are forbidden and censored in art. What exactly are these topics that artists have to avoid?

Yes. Censoring is one of the main factors that support the existence of a totalitarian government. The government of Iran claims to be a religious one, therefore the censorship is based on the rules of the religion and it may rule all over the social and private lives of all the citizens all over the country.

In visual arts, censoring is about everything. I may not be able to give you an exact answer based on what you have asked me in your question, but I may say that everything that you might not know that can be known as an artwork might become a matter of censorship, and I mean everything. But there are some basic topics that have deliberately been forbidden. That said, you will never have the right to expose any kind of nudity in any form (photo, painting, drawing, movie, etc.), you may never have the right to expose any part of a female body, and you may never have the right to criticize the government, the political leaders or any religious character.

However, even before moving to Toronto, you were already exhibiting your artwork worldwide. Is the work you show outside of Iran different to the work you show in Iran?

It has happened to me; I have created works of art and I could not put them up for exhibition in a gallery in Iran, however, I might have shown them in a private/underground exhibition for the very carefully selected audience in Tehran. To be honest, when I work I might think of some limitations that cause me to show my art work in Iran, or maybe not, but in the end of the day, I do what I think is needed to create the art work regardless of the fact that I'm exhibiting them in Iran or anywhere else. If you want the truth, as an artist with an Iranian originality, what bothers me is not only the censorship of my home land but it is also the look of the western and eastern audience to an exotic product of the Middle East. Whatever, that's the way it goes and I have managed to set myself free of all these boundaries while working, I mean, I do not forget the censorship or the thirsty look for an exotic product, but I do not think of them consciously while I am working. How and where to show them comes after that.

Artists in Iran have to fear strict consequences for their provocative artwork. Do you believe that they therefore use a more hidden way of being provocative, which is not so scandalous but still tells a lot after a further analysis?

Absolutely, this does not include all the artworks that are being created in Iran, but the artists that are willing to work on a provocative subject, create their artworks with multiple layers of meaning. Sometimes some artists become activists and make the point bold in their art works and they know that there will be consequences for what they have done. But mostly you have to seek for another or maybe be even several other layers that have been hidden beneath a work of art.

Many Iranian artists are living in exile; your decision to move to Canada was a personal one. Did you ever have to deal with consequences for your works?

Luckily up to this time that I am having this conversation with you, I have never dealt with such consequences. But you will never know if your art or your practice might have become a matter of investigation or not.

Being an Iranian artist and living in Iran, or living somewhere else but going to Iran regularly, makes you to become sensitive towards all unexpected consequences.

Women keep repeating in your paintings and videos. Are there specific motives for it?

My art works are mostly an act of self-performance, and I am a woman, with that said, it might be the main reason. This does not include all of my artworks though.

On the other hand I am interested to work on the social and political themes and I don't deny that I have strong feminist approaches in my works, my writings, my reads and my daily life.

It certainly must have been a big change in your life to move to a different continent. Regarding your artwork, can you see a difference and change in your work and the way the people but also yourself perceive it? Furthermore, do you think your aims and interest regarding your artwork have changed?

Moving to a new place has never been easy for any one. Immigrating to a new country with a completely different background is way more difficult. I decided to move to this new culture because I needed this pain to forget about a deeper and bigger pain that I am not capable of explaining it, I have created series of artworks about it though. But to be honest, no matter where you go, you'll bring

the history of your whole life with you. As I have mentioned several times before this, the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran had a huge impact on my life. On the other hand I was dealing with a number of huge bitter changes in my personal life, and I felt this weight was becoming unbearable for me. One day, I packed my luggage, one for me and one for my son, I parked my car in the parking, locked the door of my apartment and came here to Toronto with only \$2000 cash in my pocket and did not go back until a year later. This move has deliberately made huge impact on my life and my artwork, the path was not so easy though. At first I was not sure that I could stay creative or not, I mean, there are some artists that their creativity is rooted in the soil of the place they have grown up in, some others are creative no matter where they are, I was not sure to which of these two groups I was belonged to. The result was quite surprising to me. Mainly the themes that I choose are still the same, but my approach to them is from a wider angle and point of view. For instance in the video art, "The painless method" I am criticizing the capital punishment and although I did this for the cause of hanging two young thieves in Iran (in public) at that time, but my main target in the whole video art is not limited to Iran.

Do you consider yourself a provocative artist in terms that you try to break rules or norms with your artwork in order to raise awareness for a social and political issue?

Yes. I consider myself as a provocative artist. I break the rules, I do not give answers, I do not have any answers to give, but I am smart enough to know how to ask a question in order to raise awareness for a social or political issue. I mean it is the main target of any artist to do so, isn't it?

The international interest in Iranian art seems to increase from year to year. However, more and more Iranian artists are living and working outside of Iran. How do you see the current situation of the art scene in Iran and has there been a change during the last years?

The international interest might have noticed the potential of the Iranian contemporary art scene as a new wave in the history of the art, however; for me the current situation of the art scene in Iran will remain active in the way it has always been, with so many added layers though. The problem is that the current situation of the social and political life of Iran is quite unstable. The economy of the country is at its most unstable situation and this causes a huge wave of self-wanted immigrations not only by the artists and activists, but also by all other vocations.

Would you agree that the way artists work in Iran has an impact on the Iranian society?

The artist is capable of being a mirror of the society, this mirror is not always giving you a sharp and clear image of the society though, but it definitely gives you images with layers of it. Every society might face different changes by so many factors; one of them is definitely art (all kinds of arts).

Is it important for you to represent the Iranian culture and tradition in the Western society or would you prefer to not always be associated with your origin? I am asking especially regarding your work “I am not a female artist from Middle East in exile, I am an artist” from 2014. Can you tell a bit more about this work?

I have always represented my Iranian originality in my art work, I will always do so. But if you are talking about some visual codes and pictures that are introduced as the symbol of a society, no I do not follow those codes. Instead I break all those codes. Let me be clearer, a bearded man, a woman wearing black chador, a mosque and other related images have been recognized as the Iranian codes. But that is not true. As you may say all Americans are not cowboys, and not all African Americans are Jazz and blues musicians, or not all the Jews wear hats. These are some information that might be of an interest to an anthropologist, or a historian, or a tourist, or you name it. But for me, being Iranian is rooted in my behaviour and my way of thinking or my way of criticizing things, not my appearance with some very old fashioned codes.

In the video art “I am not a female artist from the Middle East, I am an artist”, I have a strong objection to the way that the society looks at me, their prejudgments and the codes that they have made in order to recognize me as some exotic product of the Middle East. In this video I am exposing my pain, the history of my life and my very deep frustration of being judged by the facts that mostly are not even adequate.

What are your current projects and plans for the future?

Currently I am living and working in Toronto. I go to Tehran quite regularly (the frequency of my flights to Tehran depends on the money I have in my pocket). Currently I am working on my new video art, which is a huge production, produced by the Canada Council for the Arts and myself. I can't give you a clear long shot of where I will be living and working in the future.

Thank you Simin Keramati for your time and your insightful answers.

4.4 The expression of provocation by Iranian artists in the Western art world

Many Iranian artists had to leave Iran in the recent years due to consequences they had to fear for their artwork but also because of the economic situation in Iran or because of their search for more artistic freedom. Moreover some artists live in foreign countries since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 until 1988 which led many Iranians to flee the country. Therefore many well-known Iranian artists are working in the Western art world and not only in Iran itself. In this chapter I am going to analyse in as far it is possible to still see these artists origin in their work but especially how Iranian artists provoke with their artwork in the Western society and if there is a noticeable difference compared to the works of their colleagues working in Iran.

I will start with the artist Parastou Forouhar who was born in Teheran in 1962 and lives in Germany since 1991. She got her Bachelor of Arts at the *College of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran* where she studied from 1984 until 1990. After the Iranian Revolution the artist left Iran to study in Offenbach am Main, Germany where the artist has stayed until today. She is certainly a critic of the Iranian regime which can be seen not only in her interviews but also after several analyses in her artwork. Today Forouhar can look back to numerous international exhibitions among others in the UK, Canada, USA, Sweden, Nepal, Lebanon, Australia or South Korea. Moreover she received many grants and residencies during the years. Parastou Forouhar is known for her large ornament artworks that sometimes cover walls, ceilings and floors of exhibition rooms.



Image 39: Forouhar, Parastou: Written Room, Art Gallery of Saarbruecken 2011.

However even though her works appear to be only beautiful harmonic patterns on the first view, once one has a closer look one can see the deep social and political meaning of her work. Especially regarding her background, as both of her parents who were political activists got attacked and murdered on November 18, 1998 by 18 officials from the Ministry of Information of the Islamic Republic (Lorch, 2017). Around 25.000 people attended their funeral (Lorch, 2017). Since then the artist is memorising her parent's death each year in their house in Iran at the date of their death (Lorch, 2017). The event nonetheless got forbidden ever since the beginning and the police is stopping people from entering the house (Lorch, 2017). In 2017 the situation for the artist was however even more difficult since she was charged in court for her artwork *Countdown* which the Iranian government understands as "Insulting the sacrosanct" and "propaganda against the system" (Lorch, 2017). However Farouhar still wants to continue to travel to Iran and fight for her rights since it is her home country with all her memories of her childhood, youth and parents and she does not want the system to take that away from her (Lorch, 2017). Interesting in this case is that the artwork which she is charged for is from 2008 and has been shown already at several exhibitions throughout the years without any problems. Only when a woman uploaded a selfie of her with the artwork in the social networks in 2017 the situation has changed (Lorch, 2017). Her work *Countdown* consists of bean bags with colourful patterns where the visitors can sit or lay on.



Image 40: Forouhar, Parastou: Countdown, Art Gallery of Neunkirchen 2013.

Because of their bright colours and mix of patterns they appear on the first view like they present a hippie like style, on the second view however one can see that the patterns display ornaments and calligraphy related to the Middle East. In fact they have religious Iranian banners stitched on (Lorch, 2017). The work can be analysed in various different ways. The artist combines religion with everyday objects where the latter is in the foreground. This could lead to the conclusion that religion is always part of Iranian's in their everyday life, even when they are not aware of it. One could go even further to say that the religious banners symbolise the religious leader and the whole government around him. Nevertheless is her provocation only visible on a second view and even then only given when analysing her artwork in a certain way which could not even be the intention of the artist. Therefore even hidden provocation and one that surely would not be detected as it in the Western society can lead to grave consequences in Iran. This shows once more the fear Iranian artists who do provocative artwork have to live with since every day could be the day where they get charged for one of their artworks even if they already exhibited it during many years without any problems. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian* the artist states that "Ornaments have similarities with totalitarian regimes. They want to make everything harmonic, and anything that doesn't confirm has to be eliminated" (Dengham, 2017). After this quotation one certainly has a different view on her works. When looking at her artworks it appears to me that at first one only sees the beauty in the ornamental works but the more background information one gets about the artist and the closer one looks and the deeper one analyses the works, the more one can see the cruelty and pain these beautiful artworks display. In one of her artworks she presents butterflies all over the exhibition rooms. What appears beautiful on the first view, has a tragic twist once one knows that in Persian poetry butterflies are often shown as a symbol for death and that her mother's name, Parvaneh, means butterfly in Farsi (Dengham, 2017). Once one receives this background information one gets a whole different view of the work especially regarding the fact that her mother was killed by Iranian officials of the Ministry of Information. Yet, even without the background information one can see when getting closer to the butterflies that

small figures appear as patterns in them. These figures appear sitting in cages, being covered with blood or in a posture full of fear. Once again beauty meets violence.



Image 41: Forouhar, Parastou: The Time of Butterflies, Kunstpalais Erlangen 2012.



Image 42: Forouhar, Parastou: The Time of Butterflies, Kunstpalais Erlangen 2012.

One of her artwork is a large four-part photography, named *Friday* which shows only a part of a hand holding a black cloth with grey patterns of flower ornaments.

The large photograph is completely filled with the cloth which makes it look like a large curtain. However due to the hand that is coming out of the cloth in the middle of the photograph it becomes clear that the cloth is in fact a chador of a woman.



Image 43: Forouhar, Parasstou: Friday.

Nevertheless is it easier to get to the conclusion when the rest of the exhibition is filled with works from the Middle East or when one knows that the artist was born in Iran. Without the context or the background information it is not easy to understand that the work is about a woman in a chador. The title *Friday* refers according to Britta Schmitz to the fact that for Moslems Fridays are what Sundays are to Christians (Schmitz). At this day the long Friday prayers and sermons are held at the mosque and as Britta Schmitz says it is “a day when morality and order are invoked and defined” (Schmitz). Parastou Forouhar’s artwork therefore has a deep meaning rooted in her Iranian origin and past even though it is not so obvious on the first view. In her artwork *Red is my Name, Green is my Name III* from 2016 the artist is showing a series of four digital drawings with either red, white and black ornaments or green, white and black.

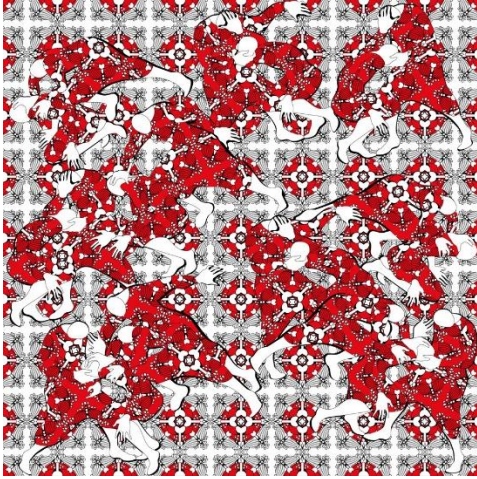


Image 44: Parastou, Forouhar: Red is My Name, Green is My Name III, 2016.

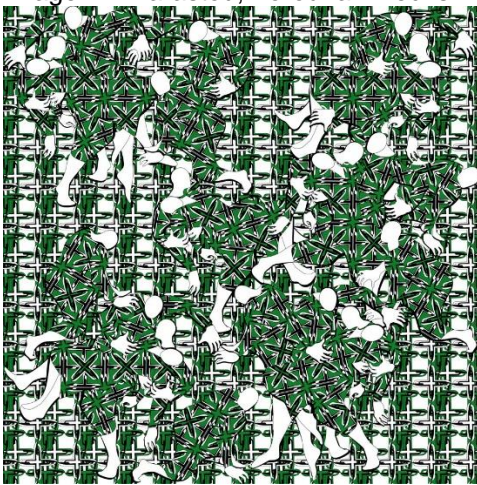


Image 45: Parastou, Forouhar: Red is My Name, Green is My Name III, 2016.



Image 46: Parastou, Forouhar: Red is My Name, Green is My Name III, 2016.

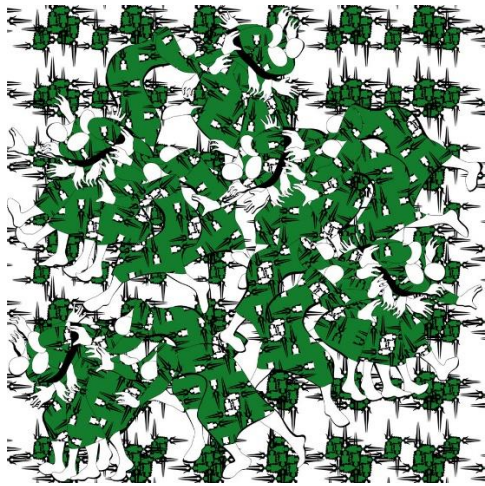


Image 47: Parastou, Forouhar: Red is My Name, Green is My Name III, 2016.

Only on the second view one can see bodies in the ornaments who are dressed in either red or on the other print green clothes. One can only see their head, hands and the lower part of the leg. The figures do not have faces but they are completely interwoven with each other. It seems like the figures are fighting with each other. Moreover in two of the works the ornaments are also built with patterns of the masculine genitals or knives. In only one of the three works are possibly women displayed who tear each other's hairs the other three according to their body seem to display men. In addition the colours the artist used for her work are also the colours of the flag of Iran. As stated by the art historian Joanna Inglot the series *Red is my Name, Green is my Name I-III* portrays torture elements combined with the harmless beauty of the ornament (Inglot).

What becomes clear in Parastou Forouhar's work is her strong connection to her homeland even after nearly thirty years after her emigration. Her works contain ornaments, Persian calligraphy or photographs of veiled women which are the typical symbols that let one connect her work with the Middle East. Her work provokes most of the time only on a second closer view. Especially with the artist's background in mind, her work unquestionably does provoke and does try to raise awareness of political and social problems in Iran. However in the Western society she is not breaking the norms and rules with her artworks, nonetheless also exhibition visitors in the Western art world are able to understand the provocation of her works as they are customarily familiar with the rules and norms in Iran.

Another artist I want to closer examine is Azin Feizabadi who was born in 1983 in Tehran but came to Dortmund, Germany with his mother as asylum seekers in 1990 (Berner, 2018). From 1993 until 1998 he lived again in Iran with his dad until he finally immigrated to Germany where he today lives in Berlin (Berner, 2018). He studied in Berlin at the *Universität der Künste* from 2004 to 2009 and afterwards two years film art in New York (Berner, 2018). Feizabadi exhibited among others in Italy, Iran, Germany, USA and Egypt. In his sculptures, photographs, performances and movies he constantly tries to tell stories where he switches between fiction and documentation, between experiences and memories of himself but also of the collective. In his work *Ich bin Deutscher* (I am German) from 2017 Feizabadi shows a 4 meter long, 2,20 meter high with a depth of 40 cm big stone sculpture with wholes that says: “Ich bin Deutscher”.

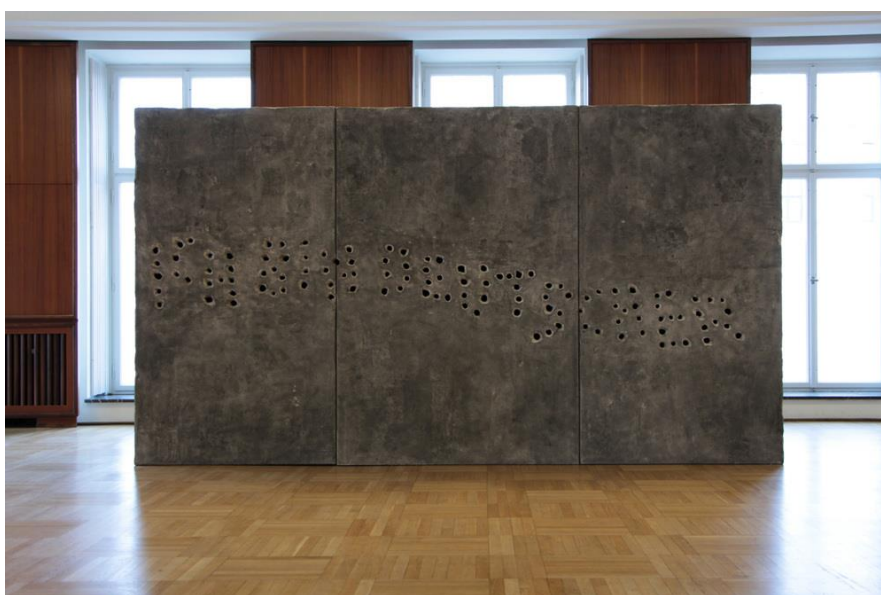


Image 48: Feizabadi, Azin: Ich bin Deutscher, 2017.

The wholes from in the sculpture look like from a shooting and as the *Maxim Gorki Theatre* Berlin writes are a symbol of the events that took place in July 2016 in Munich, Germany when a 18 year old man shot nine people in a shopping centre and shouted “Ich bin Deutscher” before he shot his last victim (Azin Feizabadi Display). Even though he shot nine people all from a migrant background his act was officially called a killing spree with no political intensions (Kampf & Stroh,

2017). Mass shootings in Europe are often quickly called Terror attacks as soon as it is clear that the shooter is from a migrant background or shouts for instance “Allahu akbar”. Nonetheless in this case the shooters right wing political beliefs which led to the deaths of nine people was not seen as a political act. With his artwork the artist critically questions the stereotypes in the Western society and the media presentation of events like the shooting in Munich. His provocation is the confrontation with the topic per se as well as the slogan, which remains as etched in stone always in memory. However in order to understand the provocation one has to understand how the media presentation works in Germany as well as how quickly parts of the society judge especially since the great wave of refugees entered the country just before the event took place. Moreover the provocation is in this case only working in Germany but not in Iran as it does not break any norms there.

In his video work *The Epic Of The Lovers: Mafia, God & The Citizens* from 2009 Azin Feizabadi displays in 27 minutes the memories and experiences prior and after the 2009 Iranian elections from himself as well as of other Iranians.



Image 49: Feizabadi, Azin: *The epic of the lovers. Mafia, God & The citizens*, 2009.

Certainly for a movie about this events the artist would have to fear great consequences in Iran like the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi who was supposed to be arrested for six years and should be banned of working as a filmmaker for twenty years because of his plans of making a film about the presidential

elections (Nirumand, 2010). In Germany however it does not seem to be provocative but rather a documentation mixed with fiction about an political event. What needs to be mentioned about Azin Feizabadi is that he himself does not see his work as a provocation, he does not have the intention to provoke which is why it does not fit into the definition of provocation given earlier in the thesis. The reason I chose to analyse these two works by Azin Feizabadi is however the interesting fact that his work about the presidential elections would be highly provocative in Iran and most likely not allowed to be shown. Furthermore he could get sentenced like the director Jafar Panahi who only had the plans of making a film about the events. This leads to the conclusion that Iranian artists outside of Iran can certainly be more provocative with their artworks even though it might not be detected as a provocation per se.

Another artist I want to examine is Anahita Razmi who was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1981 but is of Iranian descent. Her mother is German but her father Iranian which is why most of her works have a strong connection to Iran (Gregori). She studied from 2001 to 2006 Media Arts at the *Bauhaus-Universität Weimar*, from 2005 to 2006 at the *Pratt Institute* in New York at the Faculty of Media Arts and Fine Arts and from 2007 to 2009 Fine Arts at the *Staatlichen Akademie der Bildenden Künste*, Stuttgart. The artist can look back on several grants, awards and residencies including the *MAK-Schindler Artists and Architects-in-Residence Program* in Los Angeles in 2012, the *Art Division/New Face Award* at the *18th Japan Media Arts Festival* in 2014 or the *Goethe at LUX Residency* in London in 2018. Her enormous amount of international exhibitions around the world demonstrate once more the international prominence of the artist.

In one of her work of 2007 *White Wall Tehran*, a 45 second video work Anahita Razmi shows the footage of a white wall with some background noises like a radio transceiver, music or someone stirring coffee. The video was made during a trip to Iran in January 2007 where the artist got stopped by Iranian revolution guards because she had filmed them (Razmi). The 27 seconds immediately got erased by filming the white walls of the guard's headquarter which is what can later be seen on Anahita's video work (Razmi).

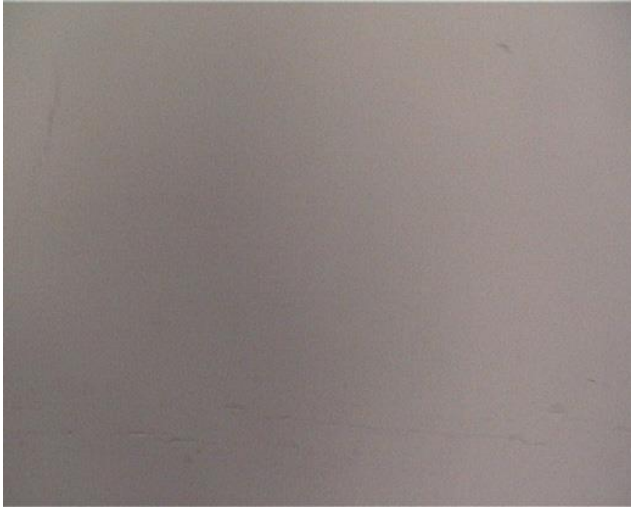


Image 50: Razmi, Anahita: White Wall Tehran, 2007.

In this case the provocation of the video work is only visible once the artist explains the situation at the end of the video. Before one cannot understand what the white wall and the sound display. However once the explanation is given the provocation of displaying the act of the Iranian revolution guard becomes clear. What seemed to be a provocation for the guard before but was presumably only a documentation of the artist of her Iran trip, now turned into a provocation while the artist is highlighting and clearly questioning the actions and prohibitions by the revolutionary guards in Iran.

In her Video work *Middle East Coast West Coast* from 2014 the artist is re-enacting the video talk *East Coast West Coast* from 1969 by Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson.



Image 51: Razmi, Anahita: Middle East Coast West Coast, 2014.

In the original movie the two are improvising a conversation between someone of the US East Coast and someone by the US West Coast with its existing stereotypes and clichés (Razmi). Anahita Razmi used the audio track of the original work but covered her two actors with two identically black veiled people. The black cloth is covering not only the whole body but also their faces and therefore can be seen as an exaggeration of existing clichés towards Muslim women. The irony of the video work is that one assumes only because a black cloth is covering a body that a woman must be underneath while in fact only one of them presents a woman and the other one moves according to the voice of Robert Smithson. It further demonstrates that as soon as one detects an Iranian symbol one gets the connected stereotypes in mind. Moreover even the original work plays with prejudices and stereotypes and therefore even though the conversation is about people of the two US coasts one immediately transfers the stereotypes and prejudices to the Middle East and the West. Certainly the title of the work helps for this transfer but it nonetheless is most likely due to the symbol of a Burka or a Chador which one connects directly with the Islam. Besides, it also shows that even though these two people wear the same clothes and look identical, they still have two individual characters and are different to each other. Transferring this fact towards Muslims, her work could also demonstrate that they are not all sharing the same beliefs and behaviours and one needs to distinguish each as an individual person with its individual belief, especially in religious and political matters. This demonstration seems to be even more important since the huge refugee crisis in the recent years which strengthened a lot of stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslim people. Therefore the provocation is probably mostly addressed towards the Western society even though it might seem like a provocation addressed to Islamic countries on the first impression.

The last Iranian artist I want to closer examine is known as a pioneer of the Iranian women in art, Shirin Neshat, who is since many years living in exile but still unconditionally raising her voice for women in Iran. Shirin Neshat was born in Qazvin, in Iran, in 1957. She left Iran in 1974 to study in Los Angeles, California. During the Islamic revolution she was still in the United States and obtained her master's degree in Fine Arts in 1982 at the *University of California*, Berkeley.

When she later on in 1990 returned to her home country she could not recognise it anymore since it had completely changed during and after the Islamic revolution (Navab, 2007). This shocking experience of the country she grew up in inspires her artwork until today. Shirin Neshat received numerous awards including the *Golden Lion First International Prize* at the *48th Venice Biennale* in 1999, the *Grand Prix* of the *Kwangju Biennale* in Korea in 2000, the *Hiroshima Freedom Prize* from the *Hiroshima City Museum of Art* in 2005 and the *Lilian Gish Prize* in New York in 2006. When looking at Neshat's artworks and having her personal background in mind it seems that she is constantly in between the two worlds of the Middle East and the West, though she does not find home in any of them. Her works show admiration of Iran and in the same time a strong critique. It is her home but also the country whose government made her live in exile. In her artworks she constantly questions the role of the women in Iran.

Her most famous work is *Women of Allah* of the 1990s right after her first trip to Iran after the Islamic Revolution. It features black-and-white portrait photographs of herself posing in a chador with feminist Farsi poetry written over her hands, feet or face.



Image 52: Neshat, Shirin: *Rebellious Silence*, 1994 of the series *Women of Allah*, (1993-1997).

She further positioned guns next to her face, over her hands or for instance between her feet which are in some cases directly pointed towards the camera. The photo series deals with the question of martyrdom, faith, violence and the status and power of women in Iran.

However, Neshat claims that even though it is one of her most known artworks it has nothing to do with who she is now since her work became different over the years and can now be interpreted in a wider angle ("New Style Sacred Allegory: The Video Art of Shirin Neshat," 2002). She also insists that she is not a feminist but rather thinks that through the study of women one can find the truth of the culture since women have to deal with more restrictions and fight harder and are therefore forced into more active engagement ("New Style Sacred Allegory: The Video Art of Shirin Neshat," 2002).

From 1998 on the artist started to make films since she felt the limitations of photography in the way she was approaching it (MacDonald & Neshat, 2004).

"I think of film as the most complete form of art because it has everything. It has photography, theatre, performance, storytelling, painting, sculpture. As artists, as photographers, we can work hard to obtain great photographs, but then you look at certain fantastic films and every shot is a masterpiece of photography. And some of them are very painterly. Some of them are very sculptural. And for me, with film there is also a way of bringing in dance choreography ideas. So, if I have the chance to mix everything together" (Ebrahimian, 2002).

In her film *Soliloquy* from 1999 one can see the artist walking in two different cityscapes, on the left in a Middle Eastern city and on the right side in a modern urban landscape. The movie certainly deals with her own position living in two different worlds, with two different cultures as well as in memories of the past and in the present. Therefore like many other Iranian artists living in the Western society Shirin Neshat also deals with the question of identity.

At another film *Rapture* from 1999 one can look at two video screens which are positioned opposite of each other, one displaying images of men, one displaying images of women. The men are in a Middle Eastern city walking towards a fort at the edge of the ocean. They are dressed with white shirts and black pants and appear as a homogenous group. The women on the opposite are all dressed in black chadors and walk towards a beach where some of them go on a boat and

set out to the sea. In the end of the film the men are waving to the women who are sailing into the distance and the women who remained at the beach watch them without any gestures or movements. It is not clear if the men are waving to say goodbye or to stop the women from sailing away. There are no shots by single people it is always a whole group acting together. The contrast between the women on the one side dressed in black and the men on the other side dressed in white separates the already by screen separated groups even more from each other.

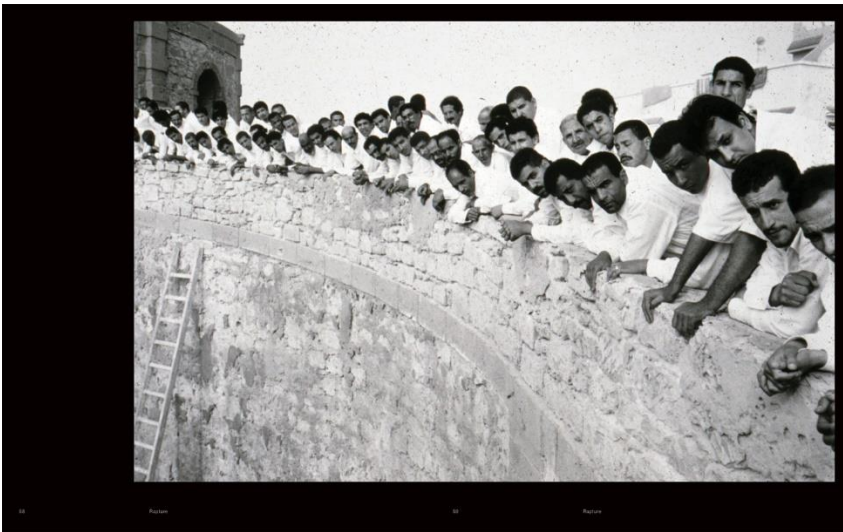


Image 53: Neshat, Shirin: Rapture, 1999.



Image 54: Neshat, Shirin: Rapture, 1999.

The artist herself explains her film as follows:

“Rapture examined the relationship of Moslem women, or at least religious women, with nature. [...] In fact, if you were to see a Moslem woman by the sea, or by the mountain, or by the forest, it would seem odd. Something appears to be strange, as if they don't belong there. I examined the issue by asking: ‘What if you remove these women from that expected urban environment and place them in the context of nature, a landscape that has absolutely no evidence of civilization?’” (Ebrahimian, 2002).

According to the artist's intention it seems as if the women in *Rapture* are able to escape their roles they have in civilization by sailing away into another unknown, maybe better, but certainly self-chosen place. The men however do not leave nor help the women but stay in the world they are used to and calmly observe them. Only when the women are finally gone, it seems as if the men realise what happened and either say goodbye to them or want them to come back. Conclusively Shirin Neshat's film is referring to a wider context and speaks about the regime and the bravery of women fighting for their rights and trying to break their given boundaries. Furthermore the men most likely symbolise a country run by men who suppress women's rights.

With no doubt Shirin Neshat provokes with her artworks. She chose to stay critical and in exile in order to have a voice for those who do not have a voice in Iran. In her Ted Talk in 2010 the artist says that every Iranian artist is in one way or another political since censorship, arrest, torture or even execution defines all of their lives: “Artist are in a position of danger. We are there to inspire to provoke, to mobilize, to bring hope to our people, we are the reporters to our people and the communicators to the outside world. Art is our weapon. Culture is a form of resistance” (Neshat, 2010). Living in exile brings constant longing for one's home country with it as well as prejudices of the Western society and the image they have about Iranians and the Islam in general (Neshat, 2010). She wants to remind the people outside of Iran but also in Iran itself that they once had a democracy and make them not forget what Iran used to be before the Islamic Revolution (Neshat, 2010). Furthermore Shirin Neshat demonstrates the power of Iranian women, not in a way to say that they are not suppressed in Iran but more in a way to show that they are powerful and educated and that the stereotypes she faces in the Western world do not do any justice to them (Ebrahimian, 2002). For

her the women in Islam are an embodiment of the structure and the ideology of Iran (Neshat, 2010). It seems as Shirin Neshat wants to show the good and bad side of her country in the same time. First for raising awareness of the social and political situation of Iranians and second to fight against prejudices and to show the beauty of her country, religion and culture: "Beauty and Beast co-exist in my work. It is a representation of that culture. It talks about violence, politics, and repression, but also about beauty and mysticism and everything that is wonderful in it" (Ebrahimian, 2002).

To sum up, Iranian artists living outside of Iran provoke in a similar way as their colleagues in Iran, for the same purposes but in some cases even more critical and more obvious. The reason for a more discrete provocation is most likely still the fear of consequences in Iran since some Iranian artists still regularly visit their home country. It appears however much easier for them to be provocative than for artists living inside of Iran. Moreover most of the Iranian artists living in the Western society have to deal with prejudices and stereotypes of the Islamic culture which they try to fight against with provocation that in this case is addressed towards the West and not to Iran. This fight against clichés and injustices combined with a general question of identity and a strong critique against the Iranian regime is what unites all of the Iranian artists I examined.⁸

5. Conclusion

In conclusion this thesis has given account of the variety of different forms of art provocation with a focus on Iranian art. In order to engage a social political change artists are provoking with their artworks to gain attention and raise public participation. Especially media is playing a wide role as it has the ability to reach a big audience and to develop further discussions. The difference to political art is however the intention of the artists to break norms or rules. Each provocative

⁸ Further investigations about Iranian artists living outside of Iran with various interviews are still planned for the future.

art is at the same time political but political art does not necessarily have to be provocative. Political art does not presuppose an intention of the artist to be provocative. Artists can also just display a political situation or event without being provocative since no rules or norms were broken. Furthermore I do not necessarily agree with the definition that every art is political even though art is in a complex matter always part of the social and political conditions that the artists have to deal with. Even though the choices the artists make during the production process are strongly affected by politics, I still believe it needs to be distinguished by art that is made for the arts purpose and art that has a political content or is strongly provoking with its style.

Each provocation only works in its specific time and its specific place. Some provocative artwork is not considered as provocative during the time of formation but rather later during a different time period with different politics, laws and morality. In this case I would name it political art rather than provocative art since in my opinion the artist's intention of provoking is indispensable for the definition. Nonetheless, artists have to be careful with getting too much attention for themselves and their provocative work instead of for the social and political statement behind it. In Santiago Sierra's case the debate about him acting morally correct or incorrect is often higher than the debate about the problem he illustrates. Another key point to remember is the question about the space where artists exhibit their work. Gran Fury for instance tried to present their work mainly outside of the art world venues in order to speak to a different audience. However they only reach them for a short period of time and do not offer much substantive analysis. They rely on donors' money and in addition get the most attention through scandals and the media but could miss the actual aim of their work. Therefore I believe it is necessary that artists and art institutions work on a good relationship between art and cultural politics as they have the possibility to get art into the society and turn it away of its elitism.

Furthermore this thesis has given an insight into the contemporary art scene of Iran and its provocative artists. The interviews as well as the analysis of Iranian artists who live or used to live and work inside Iran have shown that even though they have to deal with a lot of restrictions in their work they still manage to be

provocative. Even without touching the topics that will be censored, they still break rules and norms in order to provoke and induce a social and or political change. Regarding the Iranian artists working outside of Iran it became obvious that their artwork mostly has a strong connection to their country and raises questions about the stereotypes and prejudices of the Western society towards the Middle East as well as about their own perception of Identity while living a life between two completely different cultures. Yet for many Iranian artists living outside of Iran the provocation is not that different to the ones of their colleagues in Iran and still only visible on a second view. Nonetheless most of the Iranian artists who live outside of Iran still visit or exhibit in Iran quite regularly which could be one of the reasons for this phenomenon. If this is not the case and artists are living in exile, it seems as if the artworks indeed get more provocative. However, in order to really get a profound opinion of the differences between the artists working inside and outside of Iran further investigations with more artists have to be done.

Art in Iran can generally not be reflected and analysed without having the political and social situation of the country in mind. The artist Shirin Neshat goes even so far as to say that no Iranian artist can stay out of politics as it has such a strong influence on all of their lives. However the artist Simin Keramati also highlighted with her work the issue that the Western media and art scene seems to mostly be interested in Iranian artists only because of their origin and not because of their artwork. It should therefore be considered with caution to generally only promote Iranian artists according to how provocative and or political or “typically Iranian” their artworks are. Each provocative artist in exile is taking a great risk with their provocative artworks with only the aims to make a change, to raise awareness and to act as a voice for their colleagues, families and friends who are still in Iran. These risks can lead to the fact that they might never return to their country and are separated from their families, friends and culture. In the same way is it certainly of a great importance for Western art institutions to continue to work together with the art scene in Iran as to eventually contribute to an opening of the country.

In summary the thesis has explained the interface between art, politics and provocation as well as highlighted the advantages and risks of different provocation strategies especially regarding their place of display. It demonstrated the differences and challenges that artists encounter as well as their effects on society. In order to get a result about the question if a more hidden provocation can lead to a greater change than the scandalous provocation further research with more artists needs to be done in the future. Nonetheless the thesis was able to examine two different and mostly unexplored areas: first the difference between political art and provocative art and thus defined provocative art as its own art spectrum and second the contemporary art scene in Iran with artists living inside and outside of Iran and how they use art to be provocative in order to initiate a social and or political change. Provocative art, especially in Iran, is from great importance, has a great impact on society and politics, and is in any kind of form a certainly brave act to raise awareness for a social and or political issue.

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Coimbra, June 2nd, 2018