



INTRODUCTION TO AMIR ESBATI, “THE STUDENT MOVEMENT OF MAY 1968 AND THE FINE ART STUDENTS”

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The 1979 revolt in Tehran that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, after a reign of thirty-seven years, could be called an “image revolution.” Not only was it transmitted live on television screens around the world, it also generated an extraordinary number of images. There were so many of them, in fact, that once “victory” was won, the immediate fate of those unedited images was to become part of an indistinct mass of visual ruins. And though these visual remnants of the revolution included paintings, films, photos, graphic arts, music, slogans, word games, cartoons, and caricatures, there were arguably more posters than anything else. From the south of Tehran, inhabited by the newly migrated rural poor and the working class, to the central areas of the city, any wall or bus station was used for posting messages, slogans, and other subversive imagery. In the area between Shah Reza street—renamed Enqelāb after the revolution—and Tehran University, most of the public statues were covered from top to bottom with scribblings and handmade bills expressing complaints but also hope.

Not unlike the images that circulate on the Internet today—taking on a life of their own as soon as they are posted online—the images of the 1979 Iranian Revolution transcend their producers. Take as an example the manifesto translated for the first time in this issue of *ARTMargins*: written by Amir Esbati, a 23-year-old student from the

Faculty of Fine Arts, it was published in January 1980, just a year after the revolution, in a journal entitled *Labor and Art (Kār va Honar)*.¹ Esbati's manifesto links the visual microhistory of local struggles to the reappropriation of popular art and agitprop imagery elsewhere, bluntly qualifying the notion of an "avant-garde" as elitist. His essay is particularly relevant for the way it seeks to capture the essence of a new era for public communication in Iran, through revolutionary spaces and innovative means of expression. The students from the Fine Arts Faculty who had embraced the revolutionary cause were most often inspired by basic Marxist ideas regarding labor exploitation and class struggle, with either a Soviet or a Maoist inflection. However, as Esbati's text shows, the local understanding of Marxist ideas, although debated at the time by scholars and university professors, remained vague and open to interpretation; translations of Marxist literature were only beginning to appear more openly in Iran around the end of the 1970s, and they were still rare in the run-up to the revolution.²

Amid the growing number of anti-Shah demonstrations worldwide, the newly born local student groups who were committed to activist visual practices interacted with the Confederation of Iranian Students (usually referred to as the CIS, or simply "the Confederation") in France, Germany, and the United States. The main difference between the local insurrection and the foreign insurrections of Iranian students was that the local groups always had to share public space with other religious and nationalist groups who had even louder voices, while the Confederation of Iranian students in European and US cities was able to connect with various leftist and internationalist networks.

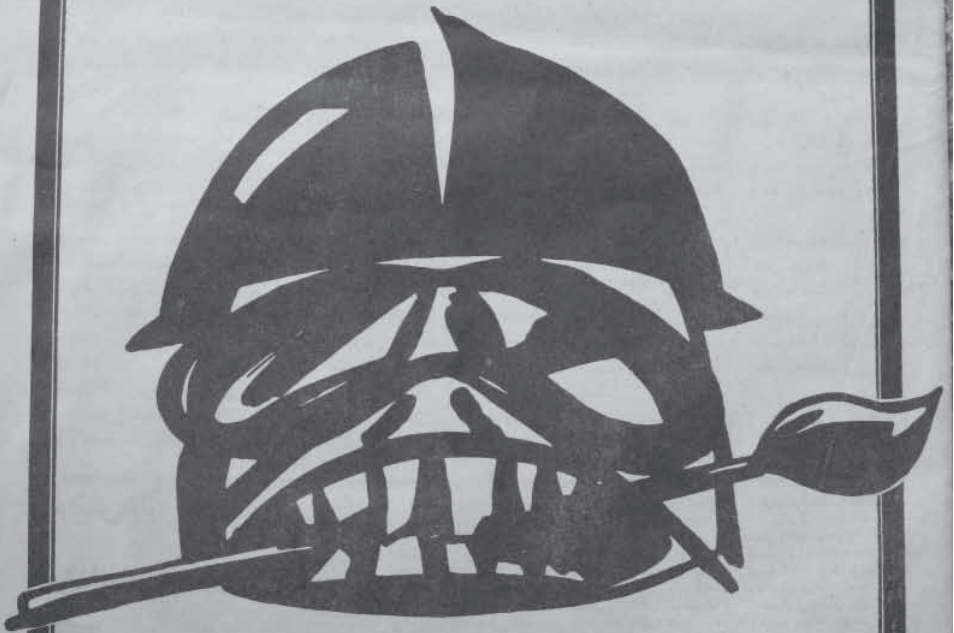
The leftist positions actively promulgated by students in the Fine Arts Faculty of Tehran University—located on the far east side of the university, along Shah Reza Street—echoed the ideological lead of

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- 1 Like many insurrectional publications, *Kār va Honar (Labour and Art)* was short-lived, existing for only two issues. It had a print run of between 2,000 and 3,000 copies, was distributed by hand, and was produced by the most active forces among the "agitprop" leftist Iranian art students. Spontaneous publications and "street journals" such as *Labor and Art* usually could not survive for more than a few months before their publishers were either jailed or tortured, depending on how much attention the newspapers received.
 - 2 The student group to which Esbati belonged, Group 57, took its name, posthumously, from the year of the revolution according to the Iranian calendar (1357). The group included artists as well as former students such as Nikzad Nojumi and Arapik Baghdassarian. Their insignia was a fist and a red star printed on the corner of each poster.

- جنبش دانشجویی مه ۱۹۶۸ فرانسه و دانشجویان هنرهای زیبا
- تازمردمی و تحول آمریکای لاتین
- دو نامه از پیکاسو
- کامران بزرگ نیا • مرتضی تقیپان • شعر
- چوکاندیری • علیرضا شاکری بیکتا •
- اکبر سردوز آملی • قاضی ریحانوی: قصه
- ما و کانون نویسندگان ایران

کار و هنر

★
کاهنامه
شماره دوم
دی ۵۸
بها ۲۰ ریال





Kār va Honar (Labor and Art). Day 1358 (January 1980). Courtesy of the author.

writers and poets who had paved the way for their Marxist ideas, such as the communist poet and activist Khosrow Golesorkhi, the writer and critic Jalal ale-Ahmad, and Ahmad Shamlou, who was known for his innovations as both a poet and publisher. The work of these writers was deeply rooted in popular experience and was harshly critical of cultural westernization and imperialism. More than other leftist students, the art activists saw themselves as internationalists, inspired by accounts of the Prague Spring, the Mexican Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and the anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States and elsewhere, all of which were documented by the *Ketāb-e Jom'e* journal, edited by Shamlou.

In his manifesto, Esbati insists on the Iranian students' interna-

شماره دوم
 بولشه می‌شدند، اما هدف
 می‌نوایست این باشد که از
 یک نظمگرگرایان کشور شرق
 بپوشد شود، باید از تنگنای
 - آلفه خلق های جدید در
 هر کجا که کارگران می‌جنگند،
 صامت بود.
 بیش از ده آتش کفکف
 محل تولید آنها در پاریس
 هر یک خلد می‌نود - و
 اغلب بدون نام طراح -
 فرستاده شده‌اند.
 آتش سیاسی - از همه
 نوع - از مدتها پیش وجود
 داشته است ولی پوسترهای
 به ما سه به تکواشی آن
 می‌صناعت، چرا که کیفیت
 آن، نوع خلاصت نگار رفته
 شده و تاثیر آن بر بیننده
 تا نامعلوم نظر ندارد.
 آشنایان بزبور تمام! ساخته
 دانشجویان هنرهای رسیا
 نبود، بلکه باید از دانشکده
 پزشکی، دانشکده علوم...
 و دیگر دانشکده‌های پاریس و
 شهرستانها و نیز گروه‌های
 مفرد نیز نام برد.
 اکثر کارها تنها یک کار
 گروهی است. با اینگونه
 های گروهی به آثار باارزش
 صرف شده‌اند، اما پیشرفت
 و خلق آنها تصادفی نیست،
 آنها نمایانگر تجربیات پیشین
 را بیش رو داشته. برای
 مثال طی سالهای ۱۹۶۷-۶۸
 مبارکاتی از آثار گرافیکی
 هنرمندانی که در جریان انقلاب
 اکثر تئوری به حمایت از
 دولت خوراها آثاری فراموش
 شدنی خلق کردند، در
 پاریس برپا بود.
 کارها بدون چاپ سیلک
 کنتور می‌گرمید (یک نوع
 چاپ دستی با ابزار ساده؛
 فابجوبی، پارچه آمریکایی،
 رنگ و مال) بنا به خصوصیت
 این نوع چاپ (انگشت
 محدود و در نتیجه سایگی
 فربها و برهیز از رنگارنگ‌های

دیگر این فعالیت است. هنر
 نقش ویژه‌ای در جنبش آنها
 نمود.
 بالاخره در ۲۷ ژوئن
 "آلفه خلق" نیز توسط
 پلیس تخلیه گردید. آخرین
 روزهای جنبش هشتاد و یک
 و ملاقات بود که روزهای
 اولش فرماندهان می‌نمود.
 برجهای سرخ از فرار ساختمان
 دانشگاهها و کارخانه‌ها به
 پائین کشیده شد، اما امواج
 اعتراض جوانان شامی اروپا،
 آمریکا و حتی استنبهای از
 آسیا نیز در نور دیده بود.

مطالبان مقاله با استفاده
 از کتابهای: جنبش ۱۹۶۸
 فرانسه - انتشارات جنگل -
 LES 500 ANNALES DE MAI 68
 و VASCO CASARES 1978
 POSTERS FROM THE REV.
 OLUTION. May 68.
 تهیه شده است.
 ترجمه شعاری پوسترها:
 ۱- ۶۸م، آغاز یک انقلاب
 مستر
 ۲- کارخانه‌های انقلاب شده
 آری
 ۳- جوانان در جنبش سه ۶۸
 منحصر به نهج و تکنیسر
 پوستر نبود، روزنامه‌های
 موباری، تاثیر حیوانی،
 نمایش عروسک، اجسرای
 کسرت و... می‌نمودهای
 شده در صفحه ۱۵

tionalism by drawing our attention to the eloquent affinity between their activism, on the one hand, and the activism cultivated in May 1968 in the open art workshops (*ateliers populaires*) at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, on the other.

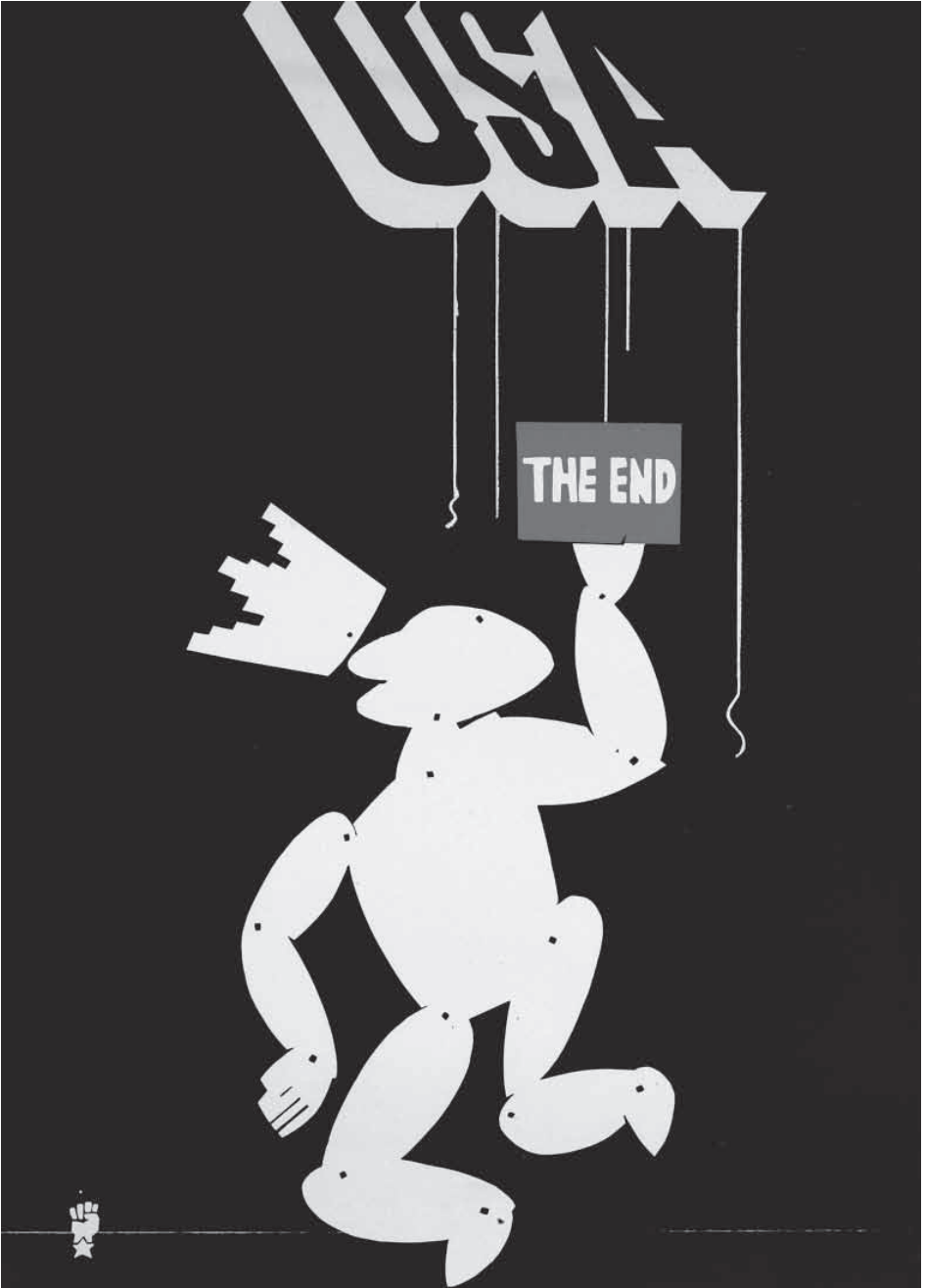
Esbati's analysis focuses on poster production, from silk-screening to color compositions, and not for nothing: these young revolutionary minds studied in the studio of the renowned graphic designer and visual artist Morteza Momayez (1935–2005), who had elevated cinema poster design and typography to the level of an interdisciplinary visual art. By further situating the Iranian Revolution within a larger frame of other social struggles, the manifesto highlights the cosmopolitanism of the Iranian student groups, while implicitly identifying Paris as the capital of third world independence movements in the 1960s. And while Esbati's interest in France and French culture could be said to parallel the Shah's professed love of everything French, Esbati's interest in France was highly strategic: he saw Paris as the home of visual guerrilla tactics that could help instruct the Iranian students in how to occupy sites such as Tehran University, which the revolution had turned into a "live museum" where the students not only produced but also exhibited their poster designs and caricatures in the form of collective display.

The anti-Shah and anti-imperialist propaganda soon translated into an intense interaction between two places: the streets—covered with political graffiti and posters—and the Faculty of Fine Arts. The more posters the revolution produced, and the more of them circulated in public space, the more the Marxist students reproduced these images on the Faculty's walls, screen-printing or photocopying them and pasting them up in an incessant back and forth between the streets of Tehran and the Faculty of Fine Arts.³ The posters originated in handmade prototypes that were then printed and made available as reproductions to demonstrators and activists. Many posters were very quickly left aside in a corner of the university, tossed onto the garbage heap of history. Their student producers never considered them art in

3 This phenomenon is largely substantiated by certain film archives from the revolution, including Super 8 reels by the acclaimed documentary filmmaker Kamran Shirdel. They were exhibited for the first time in *Unedited History: Iran 1960–2014* at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris and MAXXI in Rome (2014–15), along with original posters by Group 57 and other activists of the time. As co-curator of this exhibition (along with Odile Burluroux, Catherine David, Vali Mahlouji, and Narmine Sadeg), I note that this introductory article is an extension of our previous collective reflections.



Group 57. *In Commemoration of the 9th Anniversary of the Battle of Siahkal*, 19 Bahman 1357 (9 February 1979). Poster. Courtesy of the author.



Group 57. *The End*, 1979. Poster. Courtesy of the author.

the first place; instead, the posters were designed first and foremost for their power of social mobilization and their ability to gather and reclaim territory.

From their appearance on a wall to their photographed or filmed version, posters reflect a meeting of technology, popular arts, and modernist aesthetics at the time of the 1979 revolution: a reproducible revolution, as it turned out, as is also suggested by the thousands of



Group 57. *The Factories Belong to Us as We Represent the Work Force*, 1979. Poster. Courtesy of the author.

amateur and professional films showing demonstrators brandishing posters, banners, and signs—usually depicting Ayatollah Khomeini, although other revolutionary figures also appear (Ali Shariati, to name one). If the poster is the medium of public space par excellence, it is also that of the people and the subjects it engages, from its conceptual and graphic elaboration to its evolution in the form of reproductions and nomadic images.⁴

Not unlike the *ateliers populaires* of 1968, the Faculty of Fine Arts served as a community headquarters, with people coming and going, gathering, and debating: it was a place much more rooted in daily life, public action, and emancipatory politics than any regular art exhibition could ever aspire to be.⁵ The collective display informally known as “Revolutionary Posters” opened in mid-January 1979—roughly at the time the Shah fled the country, an event reflected in caricatures and graffiti often coproduced by students and street demonstrators, and reproduced on posters inside the Faculty. In the spirit of anti-imperialism, the posters favored Persian text but at times included English. Their main target was the Shah, whose image was dismembered and mutilated in every possible way on the posters, and who was ridiculed as both a stooge of the United States and an apologist for foreign influence.

There were also side events accompanying the Faculty exhibition, from theater programs to short film screenings and broadcasts of revolutionary songs involving major figures in contemporary Iranian music, such as Mohammad Reza Lotfi and Hossein Alizadeh. The whole activity continued intensely until the day of the “final victory” on 22 Bahman 1357 (February 11, 1979), the fall of Shapoor Bakhtiar’s government and the first proclamation of the Islamic Republic by Ayatollah Khomeini. As soon as the situation became slightly more stable, the students organized a display of books presenting children’s drawings of street demonstrations and police and army crackdowns. Even more significantly, between the 11th and 19th of March 1979 they

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- 4 Iran early on honored the work of graphic designers such as Morteza Momayez, Ghabad Shiva, Ali-Akbar Sadeghi, Aydin Aghdashlou, and Reza Abedini. Their role was only reaffirmed by the institutionalization of posters in theater, film, music, and festivals. Both an echo of traditional imagery (e.g., curtain painting and calligraphy) and a plunge into modern constructivist techniques (agitprop, photomontage, reporting), the medium of the poster emerged in the hands of these artists as *de facto* political art.
 - 5 The students’ initial idea, circulated already in the fall of 1978, had been a traveling exhibition, but the Faculty of Fine Arts remained the only venue.

put up a photo exhibit entitled Report on the Revolution that featured works by Bahman Jalali, Rana Javadi, and Maryam Zandi, all of whom would later become highly distinguished photographers. Once again this display was strictly collaborative and “unfinished,” allowing for new photographs to be printed and added each day (the famous photo book that came out of it, quickly censored under the Islamic Republic and only republished later, was *Days of Blood Days of Fire* by Bahman Jalali and Rana Javadi).⁶

As the Islamic Republic became more and more authoritarian, one event in particular shook the students to the core: the firing of the teaching staff from the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (*Kānoon-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-e Koodakān va Nojavānān*, better known as *Kānoon*). As part of the purges and ideological purifications carried out by the new regime, the firings led to a backlash among the art students, who found themselves grappling with a regime they themselves had helped establish. In response, the students organized large sit-ins and public protests for several days in front of the main university building, and they even created specific posters for the occasion, which unfortunately were not preserved.⁷

The different sets of posters archived in state and private collections illustrate these political and aesthetic dissonances: throughout the entire period between fall 1978 and spring 1979, among the many images arising from the revolution, posters erupted into a chorus of discordant voices that included Marxists, students, workers, the middle class (whether or not linked to the Communist Tudeh party), nationalists, and Islamic groups. The archives emphasize the heterogeneity of visual styles and narratives during this revolutionary period: the mixing of genres, the repurposing of symbols, and the hybridization of cultural codes. Moreover, the politically organized voices were joined by other solitary voices with no party affiliation that occasionally popped up in wall writing and graffiti. All of these disparate voices were immortalized in many photographs and collections from the period, but they cannot easily be reduced to one common denominator. In a sense, Iranian poster art was protected from too much distortion or

6 Later, the students also organized an exhibition to celebrate International Workers’ Day.

7 The regime radicalized its “cultural revolution” by closing the doors of Tehran University for a period of almost two years, thus depriving the students of their main stage for activism and preventing them from pursuing their studies.



Kourosh Shishegaran. *For Today*, 1978. Poster. Courtesy of the author.

cultural homogenization by the diversity of its roots, even though in the 1980s the Islamic Republic successfully reappropriated the rich heritage of Iranian poster art.

Amir Esbati's essay helps us grasp retrospectively the grassroots visual strategies behind the Iranian Revolution. He not only articulates the formation of a collective "language" and the performative gestures underlying the "portrait" of a diverse group of people and their common political utopia, he also shows how Iran, a country that was never colonized in the strict sense of this term, echoed the independence movements and anti-imperial struggles taking place in other parts of the world, from the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement to the protests of May 68.

TRANSLATED BY HEIDI ELLISON