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Making Art in the Void:

Iranian Women Artists Between Repression and Creation

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Abstract

The author explores the reason so many Iranian video artists are women. This is the transcript of a presentation given at the Science4Peach Forum panel discussion Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Disobedience, Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression *on 10 June 2026; a link to the live recording is provided below. Reproduced here with permission.*

Keywords: Iranian women, civil disobedience, video art, Iran

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Résumé

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L'auteur explore les raisons pour lesquelles tant de vidéastes iraniens sont des femmes. Voici la transcription d'une intervention prononcée lors d'une table ronde du forum Science4Peach, intitulée Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Disobedience, Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression *(« Les femmes iraniennes et la résistance au quotidien : désobéissance civile, défi artistique et militantisme face à la répression politique »), qui s'est tenue le 10 juin 2026 ; un lien vers l'enregistrement de la séance est disponible ci-dessous. Reproduction autorisée.*

Mots-clés: Femmes iraniennes, désobéissance civile, art vidéo, Iran

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When a curator first asked me, almost fifteen years ago, why so many Iranian video artists are women, I did not know how to answer.

Since then, I have encountered the same question many times from curators, critics, journalists, and historians of contemporary art.

Each time, I found myself thinking about it again. At first, I was surprised by the question itself. I had never looked at my generation of artists through that lens. We were simply making our work. I had not stopped to consider why women seemed to occupy such a large part of this field.

Today, I think I know the answer.

To explain it, I should briefly say what I mean by video art, for those who may not be familiar with it.

Video art is an amphibian medium. It lives between territories. It is not quite cinema, not quite documentary or short film, not quite TV music video, not quite performance, and sometimes it borrows from all of them. It is a hybrid form of moving image that emerged internationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when artists began using portable video cameras as artistic tools.

Unlike cinema, video art did not require audiences to sit in a dark theater and follow a narrative from beginning to end, although some works could also be screened like short films.

It could appear on one screen or many screens, become part of an installation, a performance, or an art exhibition. Audiences could enter and leave freely and experience it in different ways.



Figure 1: Proliferation 2 © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

Historically, video art also carried a critical position against the art market. It challenged the idea of the artwork as a unique object to be owned, collected, and sold. In that sense, it was not simply a cheaper or more accessible medium. It was also part of a larger artistic rebellion against the commodification of art. Of course, like many radical forms, it was later absorbed by the market and became part of museums, collections, and high-value art economies. But in its early logic, video art offered another way to think about art: less as an object, and more as a conceptual event, a transmission, or an experience.

In Iran, video art began to flourish much later, during the early years of the twenty-first century, when contemporary art itself was expanding and finding new audiences during the so-called Golden Years of the reformist period. I say ‘so-called’ because under this hopeful surface there were political suppressions, the serial murders of intellectuals, and the violent crackdown on the student movement.

Yet for contemporary art, new possibilities were emerging. Contemporary art, new media, and international cultural exchange became part of a broader effort to present an image of Iran as modern, cultured, and globally connected. While this opening was limited and often contradictory, it created opportunities that artists were able to use in unexpected ways; almost in ways that exceeded the intentions of those who created them.

For my generation, video was not simply a medium. It was a space.

At that time, cinema and theater were heavily regulated, more than now. Publishing was censored, as it still is. Public speech was restricted, the same. Internet and social media did not exist. Contemporary art spaces were really limited. Many artistic fields were already occupied by established hierarchies, official institutions, academic structures, and mostly male networks that had developed within a modernist art atmosphere. And then, on top of all that, there were the restrictions that had always existed for women: restrictions on our presence, our visibility, and the ways we wanted to express ourselves.

Video existed somewhere in between. It was new, unfamiliar, and largely ignored. It was not important enough to attract the full attention of censorship, and it was not desirable enough for the market to control.

In other words, it was a void.

Or perhaps more accurately, a blind spot.

A territory that neither censorship nor the market had fully occupied.

And women have always known how to work with such spaces.

Throughout history, women have often been excluded from the centers of power, culture, and decision-making. As a result, we learn to survive, communicate, and create in overlooked places.

We learn to find the cracks in the wall and the way to slip through them. We occupy neglected territories. We build communities and languages where others see emptiness.

This is why I believe so many women artists were drawn to video art in Iran.

Of course, this does not mean that men were absent from the field. Many important male artists worked with video, and some of the most influential artists, curators, and promoters of video art in Iran were men. In fact, several of them played a crucial role in presenting younger women artists through screenings, and independent platforms. I am speaking about the bigger picture and about consistency. When we look at the field over time, women maintained an unusually strong presence and played a major role in shaping its language and direction.

It was not because women are naturally more interested in technology or moving images. It was because generations of exclusion had trained us to recognize possibilities in places others overlooked.

At first, perhaps we did not even realize that we had discovered a new territory. We were simply curious. We were willing to experiment. We were not afraid to fail. The toxic perfectionism that often dominates established artistic fields, had not yet colonized this space. We entered it freely and began exploring its possibilities.

Soon, many women artists used video to address women's rights, human rights, social issues, everyday life, memory, body and cultural taboos. But I believe the significance of women's contribution to Iranian video art was not only in the subjects we addressed.

Our achievement was structural.

We recognized an unclaimed territory and transformed it into a space of visibility and agency; finding opportunity of expression inside a space that nobody thought was important.

Of course, the presence of Shirin Neshat, one of the most influential Iranian artists and a pioneering figure in contemporary video art, was important for my generation. Many of us did not necessarily interested in her aesthetic language or artistic approach, but seeing an Iranian woman occupy such a prominent international position in the field was encouraging.

In a different medium, Marjane Satrapi played a similar role. As many of us are still mourning her recent loss, I have found myself thinking again about the impact she had on our generation. We belonged to the same generation. Through the graphic novel, a form situated somewhere between literature, drawing, autobiography, and cinema, she found a language that made certain stories accessible to audiences that traditional literary or cinematic forms had not reached.

There was another important aspect of video art that made it attractive to many Iranian women artists. Unlike painting or sculpture, video could travel.

A painting must be shipped. A sculpture requires transportation, customs paperwork, storage, and considerable expense. In Iran, these processes often involved official permissions and state supervision. Cinema faced its own restrictions. Even when filmmakers succeeded in making independent films, presenting them internationally often

required navigating layers of bureaucracy and official approval. Refusing to do so could create serious problems for the filmmaker.

A video file, on the other hand, could cross borders almost invisibly. It could be copied onto a hard drive, sent online, screened in an alternative space, included in a festival, biennales or shown in an exhibition thousands of kilometers away, often without any direct interaction with official institutions at all.

For artists living in a country that was politically, culturally and legally isolated from much of the world, this was important.

Video allowed our voices to travel before our bodies could.

At the same moment, digital technologies and the internet were becoming more accessible. For the first time, artists could communicate directly with curators, art directors, and audiences beyond national borders. The circulation was still limited and often difficult, but it no longer depended entirely on official institutions.

Video and the internet arrived together. Together they expanded the possibility of independent artistic exchange.

Another important factor was economics.

In Iran there has never been substantial independent public funding for artists. Most resources traditionally came either from state institutions, which often carried ideological expectations, or from commercial galleries and collectors, who generally preferred artworks that are easier to sell and less politically challenging.

Video existed outside both systems.

It was difficult to commodify and difficult to control.

This freedom, of course, came with disadvantages. Video artists often worked with very limited resources and lack of financial support. Yet the same condition created space for experimentation.

Interestingly, during the brief periods when museums, institutions and annual exhibitions in Iran commissioned video works, many opportunities went to already established male artists. Some of them produced a few video pieces and then returned to their primary

mediums. Meanwhile, many women artists continued working with video without commissions, institutional support, or sponsors' incentives.

Perhaps because for us it was never simply a medium.

It was a necessity.

Video was also closely connected to another important medium: performance art.

Many early performances in Iran survived only because they were documented on video art form. Sometimes the documentation itself became the artwork. Performance and video grew together, both were relatively inexpensive, both could happen outside traditional institutions, and both allowed artists to use their own bodies as material.

For women artists especially, this was significant.

When access to public space is restricted, the body itself becomes a site of expression, negotiation, and resistance.

Of course, this situation did not last forever.

As contemporary art became more visible and fashionable, the market arrived. Video art became a fashionable side dish, a sign of intellectual prestige within a male-dominated art market, rather than a space for genuine expression. Yet by then, the language of Iranian video art had already been profoundly shaped by women artists.

And when I look back today, I think the story is not really about video art.

It is about the ability to recognize possibilities where others see nothing.

A kind of intelligence born from limitations, from exclusion, from restricted opportunities, and from an insatiable desire for self-expression.

So today, if somebody asks me why so many Iranian video artists were women, I finally have an answer.

Video art was not a territory that women conquered. It was a territory that others ignored and we Women simply recognized its possibilities first.

We entered that space, shaped its language, and transformed it into a place from which new voices could be heard.

The real achievement was turning a void into a stage, a platform for free expression.



Figure 2: Proliferation © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

Biography

Jinoos Taghizadeh is an Iranian multidisciplinary artist, writer, and art critic based in Toronto. Working across video art, performance, installation, and literature, she explores memory, censorship, gender, and political resistance. Her artworks have been exhibited, and her books and essays published internationally. She is an activist and PEN Canada member.

Websites

Jinoos Taghizadeh: https://jinoostaghizadeh.ca/

Live recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsjn2i8hURE

Panel Information page:
https://science4peace.com/Public-Events/Entries/2026/6/science4peace-discussion-iranian-women-and-everyday-resistance.html