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Good Night, *The Indivisible Sky*: Women, Video, Iran

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Abstract

This article investigates the matriculturality of resistive video art of Iran via a comparative case study of the works of two artists, Jinoos Taghizadeh, a prominent Iranian artist, writer, and activist who lives in exile in Canada since the repressions against the Woman Life Freedom movement, and Anahita Razmi, a German-Iranian diaspora artist based in London. The comparative analysis of their works, Taghizadeh's Good Night *(2009) and Razmi's* The Indivisible Sky *(2025), elucidates the specific sociopolitical conditions to which they are addressed.* Good Night *features a lullaby of revolutionary anthems sung by a female voice translating the sound of awakening during political upheavals—the revolution of 1979 and the Green Movement of 2009—into the regenerative silence of sleep;* The Indivisible Sky *translates and redistributes among speakers of diverse identities fragments of self-reflexive writings by women about their societal roles ranging from the early twentieth century to the present and triggered by Woman Life Freedom movement in Iran. Both artists are dedicated to the creation of a contemporary Iranian matriculture, inserting its signifiers into circulation within a transnational media environment.*

Keywords: video art, Taghizadeh, Razmi, Iranian matriculture, transnational media

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Résumé

Cet article explore la matriculturalité de l'art vidéo de résistance en Iran à travers une étude comparative des œuvres de deux artistes : Jinoos Taghizadeh — artiste, écrivaine et militante iranienne éminente, vivant en exil au Canada depuis la répression du mouvement Woman, Life, Freedom [« Femme, Vie, Liberté »] — et Anahita Razmi, artiste de la diaspora germano-iranienne basée à Londres. L'analyse comparative de leurs œuvres, Good Night *(2009) de Taghizadeh et* The Indivisible Sky *(2025) de Razmi, met en lumière les conditions sociopolitiques spécifiques auxquelles elles répondent.* Good Night *[« Bonne nuit »] présente une berceuse composée d'hymnes révolutionnaires, interprétée par une voix féminine ; elle transforme le tumulte de l'éveil lors de bouleversements politiques — la révolution de 1979 et le Mouvement vert de 2009 — en un silence régénérateur, celui du sommeil.* The Indivisible Sky *[« Le ciel indivisible »], pour sa part, traduit et redistribue parmi des locuteurs aux identités diverses des fragments d'écrits autoréflexifs rédigés par des femmes sur leurs rôles sociaux, allant du début du XXe siècle à nos jours, et inspirés par le mouvement Woman, Life, Freedom en Iran. Les deux artistes œuvrent à la création d'une matriculture iranienne contemporaine, en faisant circuler ses signifiants au sein d'un environnement médiatique transnational.*

Mots-clés : art vidéo, Taghizadeh, Razmi, matriculture iranienne, médias transnationaux

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Listening to the tape recordings by the artist, activist, and writer Kate Millett from her trip to join the Iranian feminist uprising during the 1979 Revolution, media scholar Negar Mottahedeh hears pauses, noises, and mistranslations. She comes to a realization:

> …that the things that preoccupy Millett in Iran simultaneously motivate a complete misrecognition of the realities confronting her in the car, on her way to call her comrades in Paris, Millett has her hand in a bag of unripe, green, unshelled almonds. Four kilos' and twenty tomans' worth. The paper bag crinkles and I hear her crunching on the almonds as she speaks into the microphone. Her senses are fully engaged. But her ambitions and preoccupations are elsewhere, drawn to the future that has yet to arrive: the bold presence of women globally. This requires, in part, the cooperation of the media.[1]

[1] Negar Mottahedeh, *Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran* (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, 2019), 63.

Mediation is essential for conveying experiences we cannot access directly. The paragraph above brings the car scene in Tehran to life like a film scene, capturing Millett and her companions' performance. The car is a liminal space between public and private and plays an important role in Iranian cinema. Films like *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami (1997), *Taxi* by Jafar Panahi (2015), or a video by Negar Tahsili, *Wee-men or Women?!* (2008), featuring a women-only taxi driving around Tehran, add color to our envisioning of Mottahedeh's script of Millett's aural ride. The quote above mediates between the documentary and the imaginary, bringing the archival tapes to life and extending their lifespan, since text lasts longer than tape, even archived tape.[2] Mediation is usually not a one-person act—it requires, at a minimum, a technological vehicle, a sender, and a receiver, but transmission and dissemination can shade the message or even alter or scramble it altogether. In the Millett-Mottahedeh scene, the car and the magnetic tape both serve as technological vehicles—the car as a spatial vehicle and the tape as a temporal one. Mottahedeh's listening to the tapes extends their reach by half a century—hers is a historical listen, informed by the aftermath of the events captured on the tapes. Moreover, her linguistic mediation—translating all sounds into text, including English and Persian speech and the crackling of unripe almonds—constitutes a critically situated narration of Millett's recording.[3]

I find myself in a similar transhistorical situation when I write about Iranian video art. Watching, listening, and interpreting are mediations that constitute a writerly performance for an audience, conveying what is otherwise seldom seen and heard, especially outside Iran. This undertaking is a subjective act aimed at sustaining ephemeral manifestations through description and analysis, metabolizing files into text. Translating data into words that capture unstable images in a more durable medium—language—I'm using my sense of history to trigger the other senses—sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste of the almonds, pears, and cakes eaten on tape time ago, mediating the body and story into text.

Why translate visual media into text? Video art disappears from view in the blink of an eye unless its invisible data is collected, cataloged, updated, screened, and stored indefinitely. Unlike Millet's tapes, Iranian video art doesn't have an institutional shelter such as archives or museum collections that would preserve it for future mediations.[4] Secular contemporary art does not identify with the theocratic state regime and is therefore

[2] The Kate Millet Papers, 1912–2002, bulk 1951–2001, including audio recordings from her trip to Iran, are housed at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library; URL: https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/millett, accessed 14 November 2026.

[3] Negar Mottahedeh, *Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran,* has been translated into Persian by Arash Azizi (Naakojaa, 2026), bringing the text full circle.

[4] I have written about the representation of Iranian art in the US exhibitions and museum collections in: 'Iranian or Not: Sociopolitical Conditions of Art Representation,' *Transkulturelle Wechselwirkungen durch Künste und Soziales: Iranische Diaspora in Europa und darüber hinaus* (Transcultural Interplay Through Art and Social Life: Iranian Diaspora in Europe and Beyond), eds. Shirin Nowrousian, Michael Hofmann, and Tobias Schickhaus (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2022), 183-89.

officially condemned by the state in the worst case or ignored in the best case, yet unlike film production, which requires state permits, individuals can create and disseminate video under the state radar. Art institutions abroad are equally reluctant to engage with art from Iran because international sanctions effectively prevent financial transactions with Iranian citizens—not by explicitly banning them, but by making them too complicated.[5] Without institutional support, Iranian contemporary art exists precariously on personal drives and in the cloud, briefly appearing in private galleries and alternative art spaces that cannot sustain it long-term. Iranian contemporary art, in general, and video art, in particular, exist in a state of disidentification as described by José Esteban Muñoz: artists negotiate and subvert a public sphere that fundamentally excludes or erases them, and, rather than choosing between assimilation and total rejection, they tactically work "on, with, and against" dominant ideology.[6]

Writing about Iranian art is an act of solidarity with artists marginalized at home and abroad by ideological restrictions and the sanctions regime, which prevent their participation in the international art industry. As an act of mediation, my writing is informed by my experience of Soviet totalitarianism and its lingering effects, including Russian support for the Iranian regime. I am neither a 'native informant' nor an impassioned chronicler; I have followed my subjects from the Green Movement (2009) to Woman Life Freedom (2022), through mass upheavals, life-changing transitions, and endless media transmissions. In this essay, I focus on performance and video art by two women artists—one based in Iran, the other in the diaspora—to reflect, through a transhistorical lens of art, on women's societal positions and lived experiences during the first quarter of the twenty-first century, at two critical junctures of 2009 and 2022.

Political restrictions, rather than ideological differences, largely shape the advantages and disadvantages of twenty-first-century creators in Iran and the diaspora. Creators based in Iran navigate ideological censorship in their expressions and exhibitions, and must overcome international sanctions to participate internationally. Diaspora artists experience censorship and mobility restrictions to a lesser degree. Nostalgia for the 'lost state,' palpable in the art of the generation that emigrated around 1979, is less strongly felt by those born after the Revolution, whether in Iran or abroad. Viewing societal transformations through the lens of artworks activates a transhistorical approach that enfolds the past and unfolds into the future, unlike factual documentation or social media imagery, which are fixed in time. This transhistoricity distinguishes the object of my study —video art—from visual culture studies that survey collective expressions during times of

[5] The US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) classifies art as information and therefore exempts it from sanctions. However, exhibiting material art objects, such as paintings and sculptures, requires services (crating, shipping, insurance) that are not exempt, effectively precluding art exchanges with Iran. Video art is closest to 'information' in its free circulation, yet institutions are reluctant to show art without remuneration to the artist. To pay an honorarium or purchase a video for the collection, the institution would have to apply for an OFAC license.

[6] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

sociopolitical upheaval.[7] The artists and artworks are selected as subjective indicators of sociopolitical events and conditions, yet selections are made with awareness of other possibilities; as a curator working with this material for two decades, I have seen hundreds of videos and screened dozens, always programming with quantitative parameters in mind and treating art as information linking to other information, rather than an aesthetic value with commodity potential.

By taking a focused comparative approach in this article, I seek a deeper understanding of how symbolic and cultural systems intersect in the political. Methodologically, I rely on the concept of matriculture, which suits discussing women's positions in contexts where feminist practice and discourse arrived amid foreign influence and extreme, enforced ideological shifts, such as in Iran. In such contexts, framing struggles for women's rights as 'feminist' may not be acceptable to all factions with a stake in these struggles. The intersectional notion of matriculture allows us to expand methodological perspectives beyond Western-origin feminism.

Nazr: A Hopeful Beginning



Illustration 1a: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003*
© Jinoos Taghizadeh

An artist, writer, and activist based in Tehran until 2022, Jinoos Taghizadeh arranged *A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance* in Isfahan, Iran, on September 7, 2003,

[7] Pamela Karimi, *Women, Art, Freedom: Artists and Street Politics in Iran* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2024).

in front of the Sheik Lotfollah Mosque, a private sanctuary designed for women of the court of Shah Abbas (Ill.1a-c). The artist sold her wedding ring and bought seven boxes of pears, spreading the fruit on a long white cloth in front of the mosque as an offering for Nazr—a solemn ritual pledge, often involving a charitable gift, conditional on a desire being fulfilled. The terms of a Nazr must remain secret.



Illustration 1b: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*



Illustration 1c: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*

At first, passersby hesitated to approach because fruit is not a usual offering for Nazr, and certainly not in such a performative arrangement. Before long, people began asking questions. The answer, indicating Nazr, fit a known cultural idiom and needed no further explanation—the crowd cleared the fruit, the public completing both the performance and the ritual. Participation meant enacting one pledge while undoing another, the artist's marriage. The public's role in the ritual manifested the performance in the public sphere, unwittingly converting a religious act into a secular one. The secret pledge is an aporia, an 'impassable path' indicating a fundamental contradiction—the secret itself is the message, an open secret of the impossibility of free expression, dutifully ingested by the people along with womanly bodies of sweet pears. The performance is documented in black-and-white photographs from a distance, as dispassionate photo-reportage. It testifies to the hidden messages, negotiations, and sacrifices of women's lives, and to the magnitude of those sacrifices and resistances that would unfold in the following decades. It also demonstrates disidentification from state-sanctioned rituals by appropriating a sacrificial act encoded in the dominant symbolic system and publicly subverting it by imbuing the performance with a private meaning.

The patriarchal theocracy that came to power in Iran after 1979 has systematically excluded women from the nation's public sphere—the mandatory hijab law, formally instituted in 1981-83, is the most visible signifier of this exclusion, prohibiting women from self-determining their public appearance. In Iran, public expressions of gender are treated as a public, not a private, affair, and legislated as such. The symbolic system, backed by religious edicts, gradually pushed women out of the state's cultural system

through regulations that prevented the expression and display of female-coded attributes in the public sphere, including the body, voice, and, eventually, public agency. In this situation, women begin 'veiling' their expressions in officially acceptable forms, giving these acts a subversive meaning that is activated in solidarity with other women. This public activation may be obvious, as in uncovering hair during the Woman Life Freedom demonstrations, or latent, as in Taghizadeh's *Nazr*.

Nazr was Taghizadeh's early performance during a relatively calm period of reforms in Iran, which began in 1997 under President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and lasted until the election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005. This period coincided with the emergence of a new Web-based infrastructure for art production and dissemination worldwide, spreading rapidly through technological networks that linked producers and spectators, blurring the boundaries between the previously distinct art domains of production and spectatorship, and, in some cases, allowing direct access to art without institutional mediation. The World Wide Web expanded this loop of production and spectatorship beyond national boundaries. Transnational media expansion, among other factors, contributed to the ongoing denationalization of art representations and to shifting identities defined by variable contextualization rather than a fixed place of origin.

In a state where public speech is legislated, communication through contemporary art, often opaque and requiring interpretation and decoding, becomes a potentially freer mode of expression. The language of contemporary visual art requires a reading steeped in multi-layered interpretation of visual referents, so it is less direct than mass-distributed film or literature. Some references may read clearly in one context—such as Nazr in Iran—and remain opaque in others, as the hidden message of Taghizadeh's performance would be undetectable in a context unfamiliar with Muslim rituals. Video, as hybrid media, intersects referents and strategies developed in film, television, music videos, home videos, pornography, closed-circuit video surveillance, advertisements and infomercials, various visual art traditions, and social media. Significations of ready-made imagery appropriated from these sources are contextually reconfigured into another language that is fully operational only within art discourse, and decoding it requires mediation. The bottleneck of art discourse greatly narrows this meta-language's reach but also sharpens its meaning; thus, inflected, it feeds back into the broader spectrum of film, television, home videos, etc. This feedback ensures art circulates beyond the art world and broadens its potential audiences. Moreover, visual art has far fewer audiences, and its far fewer venues do not lend themselves to mass consumption. What, in another context, may come across as exclusivity, also provides an advantage for freer expression, since video makers in Iran do not have to reckon with the same degree of supervision as filmmakers and writers; videos are largely self-made and self-released under the radar of censorship, and the art spaces in which they are shown do not generate the kind of publicity that film festivals do. Moreover, art galleries maintain private viewing rooms where censors may not be invited. 'Video' becomes 'video art' within the art institution, but as it circulates on the Web, it can also survive without that institutional infrastructure. In a state where

public art institutions are utterly divorced from private art production and consumption, the Internet's loopholes and proxies open a unique public space for art and discourse within the country, as well as an avenue for global circulation.

Communications via illegal satellite channels and VPNs connecting to the Web helped create the conditions for video to emerge as a perfect medium for transnational art circulation.[8] Generational, political, and technological shifts in Iran at the turn of the millennium, which have continued into the first decade of the 21st century, positioned video and performance art as sites of resistance not only to the state-regulated cultural realm but also to the market system that, during the second period of relative reforms of the Rouhani years (2013-2021), became loosely aligned with the state. The growing prominence of Iranian art coincided with the art world's global expansion and with conscious efforts to globalize art discourse. Toward the end of the Reform period, activist artists in Iran found themselves subject to a softer and more sophisticated form of censorship: "Political art content did not disappear through prohibition; it disappeared through taste-making, market incentives, institutional preferences, and the gradual normalization of depoliticized artistic production," as Taghizadeh assesses these years in hindsight.[9] Yet women felt this 'soft' repression even more acutely, as it was stifling hopes of freedom of the generation.

Roof Piece Tehran: The Unfolding of the Movement

The widespread desire for social liberties surged in 2009 with a mass uprising against the contested re-election of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. Protests swelled into what became known as the Green Movement, demanding reforms and freedoms and preceding the Arab Spring that engulfed the entire region the following year. Other scholars have addressed these events; here, we filter them through the lens of women-made video art, seeking truth in images that capture the movement's semantics.[10]
As Millet's tapes captured glimpses of the acoustic horizon of the 1979 Revolution, the soundscape of 2009 is recognizable in calls for freedom reverberating from rooftops across the country. Appropriating the regime's own slogans — such as 'Death to the Dictator' and 'Allahu Akhbar' — people turned them against the regime through shared

[8] Susan Habib and Helia Darabi, *Video Art as a Rising Medium in Iranian Contemporary Art*, paper presented at the International Congress of Aesthetics, Ankara, Turkey, 2007.
[9] Jinoos Taghizadeh, email correspondence with author, June 2, 2026.
[10] See Navid Pourmokhtari, *Iran's Green Movement: Everyday Resistance, Political Contestation, and Social Mobilization* (Routledge, 2021); Seyed Amir Niakooee, 'Explaining the Crisis of the Green Movement in Iran (2009-2017),' *Democracy and Security*, 21(3), 2025, 229-259; Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: The Green Uprising* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Marija Antic, 'Transnational Iranian Poetics of Resistance: the Green Movement and Iranian Women's Agency in Sepideh Farsi's "Red Rose" (2014),' *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(7), 2023, 3498–3514: URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2126870 , accessed October 25, 2026.

public sentiment, using the same disidentifying strategy that turned Taghizadeh's Nazr into a performance. A rooftop, like a car, is an interstitial space connecting the privacy of the house to the publicness of the street. Nightly gatherings of entire neighborhoods on rooftops added new sound waves to the regular calls to prayer from the mosques.

This sociopolitical soundscape inspired Anahita Razmi, a German-born Iranian diaspora artist based in London, to transpose Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* score to Tehran (Ill.2). First performed in downtown New York in 1971, the score calls for eight to twelve performers, each positioned on a rooftop within sight of another. It begins with a series of improvised movements by one performer, echoed by another, with the movements transferred by sight from one to the other until the chain of bodily transmissions of the theme and its variations, emerging with each repetition, reaches the last performer, completing the chain of transmissions in a kind of 'semaphore' body language.

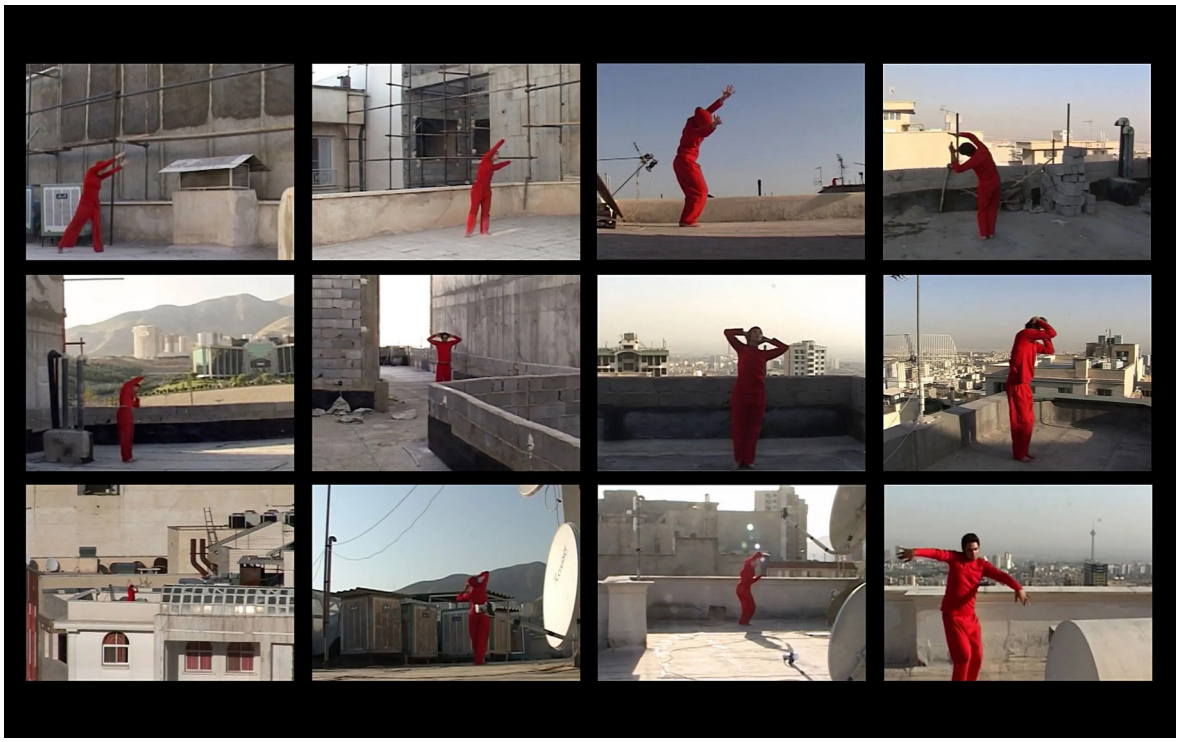

Illustration 2: Roof Piece Tehran, *2011 © Anahita Razmi*

Brown's piece, too, is an echo of another, from another revolutionary time: *Symphony of Sirens* by composer Arseny Avraamov, first presented in Baku, across the Caspian Sea from Iran, in 1922, on the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution. Avraamov conducted from a rooftop with the help of multicolored flags, his orchestra consisting of "all the ships of GosCasp, VoenFlot, and UzbekCasp, including all small boats and vessels (…) all the mobile machines, local trains, battleships, and repaired steam engines (sic.), cadets, students, and professional musicians, (…) artillery, machine guns, airplanes and hydroplanes" maneuvering throughout the city and harbor and making sounds at

designated intervals, converging into a totality of revolutionary march.[11] This idea of social choreography drifted away from the Soviet state-sanctioned propagandistic mass events toward America's Civil Rights struggles, and, disassociated from state ideology and management, infiltrated the visual language of socially engaged art practices, including Brown and Razmi's pieces. Both artists used spatial and temporal replacement to interpret the score.

Brown takes Avraamov out of the Soviet revolutionary Baku and into individualized grassroots resistance in downtown New York of the 1970s, as Razmi takes Brown's piece from the urban density punctuated by the iconic wood-clad water towers straddling New York's rooftops to Tehran's pollution-hazed blue horizon and the low-slung aerial terrain of houses anchored in the sky by satellite dishes. More precisely, from the democratic public-private space of a New York rooftop to Tehran's highly restricted airspace. Both artists plugged into the network of resistance. Razmi's *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011, is realized via a series of transpositions—first, the transposition of the protesters' voices into the silence of the dancers' movements; second, the time conversion that links the event retrospectively to the historical and neo-avant-gardes via Brown's score; and third, the translation of the live performance to video, one loop for each of the twelve dancers, to be projected on twelve screens. This shifting spatiality accentuates the diaspora artist's strategic location, which can shift from inside Iran to the outside, including possibilities of wider circulation: *Roof Piece Tehran* was first presented at Frieze Art Fair in London in 2011.

Video is a nimble medium that can move from large screens to small ones and back, and the performative transmissions discussed above reappear in the short viral video posted on social media as the next wave of resistance engulfed the country. It features five adolescent girls in casual Western-style clothing, their hair flowing and faces visible, dancing to *Calm Down* by Rema and Selena Gomez in the courtyard of Tehran's Ekbatan housing complex sometime in March 2023. The girls' choreography is deliberate, as is their choice of site for this performance video: a courtyard visible to the residents of the high-rises but not from the street. The camera is static and low-angled to emphasize the dancers' physicality while also capturing the site and situating the dance in a specific, recognizable location where we know such dancing is forbidden. The performance's impact was amplified on social media, as people in Iran and abroad expressed solidarity with the Iranian girls by posting their own videos of the dance and echoing their defiance across platforms, virtually replicating the visual communication through movement in Brown's and Razmi's pieces. The Ekbatan girls' dance manifested continuity of women's resistance through hybrid physical-digital, decentralized, loosely networked, and fast-shifting acts that gain traction on social media. These acts tie into a broader resistance

[11] Arseny Avraamov first published the instructions, or text score, for *Symphony of Sirens* in Turkish in Baku's three local newspapers on the day before the event, November 6, 1922. See Miguel Molina Alarcón, *Sound Experiments in the Russian Avant Garde: Original Documents and Reconstructions of 72 Key Works of Music, Poetry, and Agitprop from the Russian Avant Gardes (1908–1942)* (London: ReR Megacorp, 2008), 20.

that operates interstitially between identifiable protest events and everyday life.[12] Such performative defiance testifies to matricultural networks operating beyond identifiable political or social platforms, official or alternative.

Like Razmi's *Roof Piece Tehran*, Taghizadeh's video *Good Night* is emblematic of 2009 and foreshadows its aftermath (Ill.3). As the Green Movement swelled into mass demonstrations, the artist captured its hopes in the image of a white cradle with a still baby inside, swaddled in a white shroud edged in lace, set against a green wall on a red floor—the colors of the Iranian flag. We see a hand rocking the cradle and hear a female voice sing revolutionary anthems, usually sung by marching men, in the soft cadence of a lullaby, confounding political awakening with sleep. This tension holds for twenty-two minutes of the video's duration.

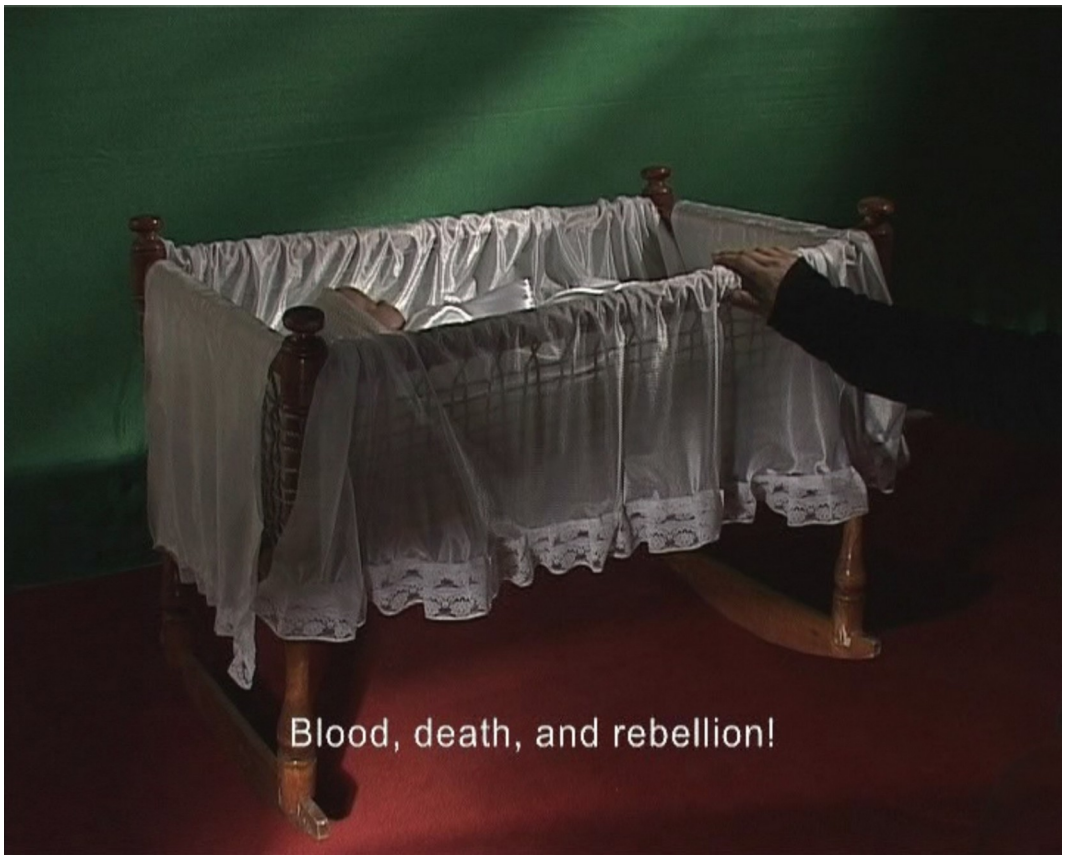

Illustration 3: Good Night, *2011 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*

The baby's cradle stands in for the emblem at the center of the Islamic Republic's flag, designed and adopted after the 1979 Revolution. In its stylized interlocking crescents, the emblem contains the Qur'anic phrase *lā ilāha illā allāh* ("There is no god but God"); the central pillar is inspired by the pillar of balance in Surah al-Hadid. Visually, it also

[12] Rana Dadpour and Hosna J. Shewly, 'Dancing *in-between*: Interstitial Feminist Defiance in Iran's Public and Digital Spaces.' *Third World Quarterly* 46 (10): 1229-48.

resembles stylized plant forms that carry symbolic meanings: the tulip (martyrdom), the lotus flower (peace and enlightenment), and the pomegranate (life). The edges of the middle white band of the flag are 'embroidered' with the phrase *Allāhu akbar* ('God is great'), written twenty-two times in Kufic *maʿqel ī* script. The number 22 signifies the Islamic state's victory on the 22nd day of the 11th month of the Iranian calendar, and thus the twenty-two-minute duration of Taghizadeh's video. The substitution of the central emblem of the birth of the theocratic mythos with a baby's cradle—universally a matricultural symbol—is the central subversion of this piece. As a hand rocks the cradle, it rocks the central pillar off balance while the female voice sings the sacred sound of Islam: *Allah*, *Allah*, *Allah*. Its impact is heightened by our awareness of its transgressiveness—women are forbidden from singing in public—and the songs in the video are decidedly of a public nature—yet who can silence a lullaby sung to a child?

Despite its evident transgressiveness, the video was first shown in 2009 as part of the artist's solo exhibition *Rock*, *Paper*, *Scissors* at Aaran Gallery in Tehran, on the 30th anniversary of the Revolution. The long duration and repetitive rocking of the unchanging heraldic image evoke the year's pent-up energy, swelling into mass uprising and then receding into stagnant suspense—Iran's unchanging regime, punctuated by resistive mobilizations in 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2022, followed by waves of state violence. *Good Night* holds the future that was yet to arrive years after its making in 2009—the Woman Life Freedom uprising of 2022 and violent state repression that followed. As a doctor from South Tehran recounts the massacres of February 2026:

> A breastfeeding mother was holding her baby when security forces opened fire on their car… (…) They arrived at the hospital in that same vehicle, riddled with bullets. The bullet passed through the baby's hand and into the mother's chest.[13]

Taghizadeh's long-duration videos unfold the *longue durée* of history, such as *Fatness upon Fatness-100* (2017), created during the year of the economic protests against the ruling classes who continue to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary citizens (Ill. 4). Like *Good Night*, it begins with an emblematic image—a powdery panoramic postcard view of Tehran fills the screen until a fork starts carving it from a corner and keeps excavating until the image crumbles. Over the next hour, the artist consumes the sugary slab of the picture cake, eating and speaking with her mouth full of contradictions that evoke the overwhelming nausea of life in a society under constant state repression affecting everyday existence. Speaking out is a life-threatening act in her situation, and choking on words is a metaphor for the ideological suppression of free speech. This forced entropic consumption points to the metabolic rift between society and its government:

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[13]Roxana Saberi and Fatemeh Jamalpour, '40 Iranian Doctors and Nurses Describe a Massacre,' *The New York Times*, February 25, 2026; URL: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/02/25/opinion/iran-protests-doctors.html , accessed October 25, 2026.

this Marxist concept of disruption of the life-sustaining cycles of labor and production between humans and nature is amplified in totalitarian societies, where the ecological disruption is intensified by an ideological disruption of exchanges between the people and the state.[14]

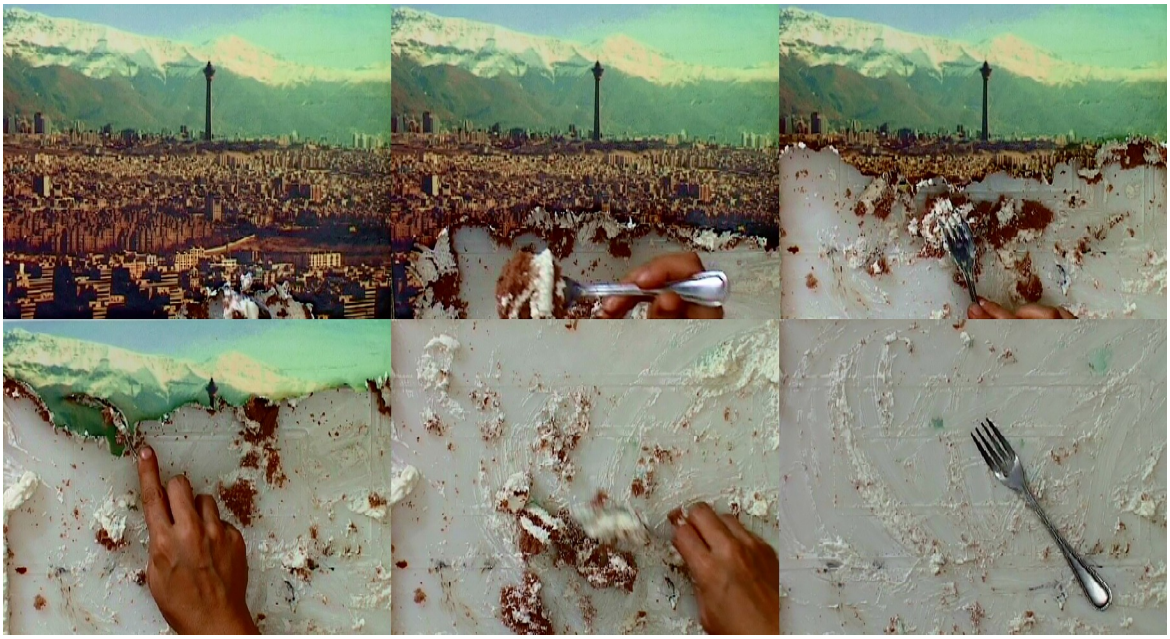

Illustration 4: Fatness upon Fatness - 100 © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

The next stage of the ongoing struggle against the regime that erupted in the Woman Life Freedom movement shifted from demands for electoral reforms within the system to an intersectional demand for fundamental systemic change.[15] Emerging in Kurdistan after the murder of a young Kurdish Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, by the so-called 'morality police' in Tehran on September 16, 2022, the resistance to state repression mobilized various minoritized ethnic and religious groups; it was spearheaded by women and encompassed the working class, enabling its rapid expansion. Engulfing the entire country, the movement spread like fire from the funerary despair of Kurdish women who pulled their hijabs at Mahsa's funeral, through the grassroots organizations and resistance networks that had long operated underground, such as KJAR (The Free Women's Community of Eastern Kurdistan). The movement's titular slogan comes from Iran's Kurdish women's ongoing fight for autonomy: ژن، ژیان، ئازادی. Morphing into the Persian

[14] John Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (2), September 1999, 366-405.

[15] For historical analysis of the Woman Life Freedom movement, see Catherine Z. Sameh, 'Woman, Life, Freedom: Iran's Feminist Uprising in Historical and Transnational Perspective,' in Mary Caputi and Patricia Moynagh, eds, *Research Handbook on Feminist Political Thought* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 437-447. An important document of the movement appears in the collection of writings by feminist activists in Iran, co-edited by Ghoncheh Ghavami and Bahar Noorizadeh and published anonymously and in translation in *e-flux Journal* #145 (May 2024); URL: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/145, accessed October 21, 2026.

زن، زندگی، آزادی, these words became a rallying cry for yet another resurgence of a long-standing liberation movement dating back to the Persian Constitutional Revolution. Translated as 'Woman Life Freedom,' these words resonated worldwide. This uprising is a significant matricultural event, transcending feminist ideology and asserting every woman's right to live.

Text and speech are the operational principles of Anahita Razmi's video and text objects created as a meditation on Woman Life Freedom in its aftermath, titled آسمانتقسیم‌ناپذیر (*The Indivisible Sky*), 2025 (Ill.5). The video is composed in a videoconferencing format of a grid of multiple screens of 'talking heads' in front of the Green Screen, a bright shade symbolic in Iran and ambivalently associated with both state authority and political dissent.[16] Ethnically and linguistically diverse individuals speak into the camera in Persian, English, and German.



Illustration 5: The Indivisible Sky, *2025 © Anahita Razmi*

The selected texts are writings by women interrogating their societal roles and their feelings as historical events unfold, ranging from the last century to the present, from letters and diaries of an early-twentieth-century modernist painter from Northern

[16] In Islamic tradition, green is revered as the color of the sacred, of life, and the afterlife (the color of garments worn in paradise: Al-Insan: 21), and is associated with the Prophet Muhammad and the mystic figure Al-Khidr ('The Green One'). Anti-colonial, nationalist, and Islamist forces (including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran) adopted the color green as their signifying color. Resistance movements in Iran, such as the Green Movement, co-opted this color to signal *their* legitimacy against the state. In all cases, legitimacy is grounded in religion, despite the resistance's largely secular demands. That the verdant green of walled Persian gardens and desert oases becomes a Green Screen, a color replacing the environment in virtual space, is also significant.

Germany, Paula Modersohn-Becker, who writes in her diary on February 20, 1903: "I must learn to express the gentle vibration of things. The curl within them" to an artist in Iran, Koushna Navabi, who reiterates in 2025, "Silent hovering, I close my eyes, my body awakens, restless calm. I push my thoughts beyond borders, I am YOU, you ME, and MeToo."

In the video, words are interchangeable regardless of authorship and origin, affirming an intersectionality that empowered the movement. This interchangeability of languages and messages among speakers reveals Razmi's ability to hold contradictory meanings, transcend representational logic, and communicate shared experiences. Detaching the message from the messenger expands its reach, amplified by media connectivity on one end while remaining anchored in the originary event on the other. The video deliberately pauses identification, creating distance between words and speakers that lets us detach from the situated message's decisive hold and activate it at the time of viewing. As in *Roof Piece Tehran*, transposition from one place to another, or from one person to another, serves as a means of communication and communion.

The Aftermath

The gains of Iran's liberation movements, including the Green Movement and Woman Life Freedom, are both real and symbolic, testifying to an active matriculture in the region. After twenty-five years of struggle, it is no longer unusual for women to appear bareheaded in public spaces; visibility leads to agency, asserting "the bold presence of women globally" that Millett and her comrades dreamt about in 1979.[17] On the other hand, the 2026 war with the US and Israel gave Iran's regime a license to do what it has not done before. What was a hypothetical possibility has become a tested reality: the closure of the Strait of Hormuz at the outbreak of the war in February 2026 gave Iran a strategic external advantage, and the nationwide Internet blackout imposed on February 28 and lasting 88 days shut down the main internal organizing platform and means of communication with the world.

Nondemocratic governments do control information in the public sphere, including the Internet, but despite their intolerance of ideational competition and dissent, few have adopted the extreme strategy of curbing all access to the World Wide Web within their borders.[18] Most nondemocratic governments pursue strategies that combine site bans and Web filtering (state-sanctioned surfing) with limited public access to cyberspace (limited connectivity)—variances in Internet policies depend on whether nondemocratic

[17] See note #1.

[18] See 'Afghanistan's Taliban Bans Internet,' *Reuters*, July 13, 2001, online on multiple sites, such as www.rawa.org/internet.htm. Reporters Without Borders issues an annual report, *Enemies of the Internet* (http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en), which, in 2014, describes policies on Internet use in Bahrain, Belarus, China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Iran, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, USA, and Uzbekistan.

leaderships ground their legitimacy in economic or ideological factors.[19] State-sanctioned surfing had been Iran's policy until 2026, even though the specter of an Iranian intranet (a national network that is not connected to the World Wide Web, also known as the 'Halal Internet') has loomed since the early 2000s.[20] Both the hardware and software of the Internet depend on the capacity of various societal entities to channel ideas through policies, including legislation, bureaucratic constraints, and normative practices.[21] As information passes through these regimens of control, its denomination may change; for instance, an aesthetic value may be converted into a social value and vice versa. This study is a limited examination of conversions between ideological and aesthetic systems of art production and circulation in a restricted and volatile Iranian context.

Video art resonates with, yet also offers a different dimension to the most widely circulated mass-media representations of Iran's liberation movements. Like art, viral social media transposes raw lived experience into the symbolic order of shared significations and perceptions. A distinctive semiological feature of mass-media representations of Iranian resistance movements is their conflation with femicide, communicated through countless media images. Neda Agha Soltan, a student murdered by a Basij on June 20, 2009, during the protests of the Green Movement, became its icon through a 40-second mobile phone video recording of the last moments of her life disseminated via the Internet. The video's composition aligns with the iconicity of martyrdom, and recording her transition from life to death transubstantiated Neda into a symbol of the movement. Her name, which in Persian means 'voice' or 'divine message,' contributes to her transformation from a person into a symbol of the ideological and spiritual struggle against oppression, and establishes, rather than disrupts, the continuity of that struggle with the revolutionary ideation:

> Her death, enclosing the summa of the sufferings of the reformist movement, expressed the strength and determination of the dissidents and spiritually anticipated the earthly eschatology of the regime change, when the "*mostazafin*" [the "weakened," or the oppressed in Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse of Shiism with a Marxist inflection of Ali Shariati] will triumph over the "*mostakbirine*" [the "arrogant," or the oppressor in the above-mentioned

[19] Geoffry L. Taubman, 'State-sanctioned Surfing, Limited Connectivity, and Varied Access to Cyberspace in Nondemocracies,' *Asian Perspective* 27, no. 2 (2003): 105–140. Case studies exemplify China's state-sanctioned surfing as guided by economic policies, whereas limited connectivity in Cuba is an ideologically driven policy that also stunts economic development.

[20] Reformist president Hassan Rouhani, elected in June 2013, did not immediately reverse this course, stating that a national news and information broadband network was on the agenda for 2015, its implementation aided by the Chinese business expertise. See 'Iran: Cyberspace Ayatollahs,' in *Enemies of the Internet* report by the Reporters Without Borders, URL: http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en/2014/03/11/iran-the-revolutionary-guards-the-supreme-council-for-cyberspace-and-the-working-group-for-identifying-criminal-content , last accessed October 25, 2026.

[21] Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Flow Freely,' *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 185–214.

dialectic].[22]

This underlying eschatology of femicide extends to the precedent that triggered the Woman Life Freedom movement: the murder of a young Kurdish Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini. The photograph of Amini, unconscious and connected to a ventilator, taken by journalist Niloofar Hamedi, became the originary image of the movement, and interpretations of her image proliferated in many forms after her death. Femicide is transposed into martyrdom within the symbolic order, operating within a theological idiom despite the movement's opposition to theocracy and its secular goals.[23]

Video art emerging from the resistance offers an alternative to the mass-media iconicity of femicide as martyrdom, as it appropriates the symbolic into the personal, secular realm, speaking about life rather than glorifying sacrificial death: Taghizadeh transposes Nazr into her performance of personal desire, and Razmi uses words spoken among many people as a manifestation of living exchange. Many Iranian women artists carry out this reorientation from the woman-as-martyr toward woman as a living, speaking, and acting being.

Why do so many women work in video in Iran? Some of the reasons mirror the conditions that made video the medium of choice for women in Euro-America in the 1970s: accessible means of production, portability, weak institutional barriers that enabled women to make this emerging medium their own, and the meager commodity value of video in the art market at the time of its emergence, lessening competition in a marketplace dominated by men. In Iran, video largely escaped regulatory oversight, and sharing was easy through mass media channels outside art-specific circulation, whereas governmental permissions were necessary to ship art objects such as paintings and sculptures. Years of oppression made women in Iran especially adept at locating the cracks in the system and filling these interstitial spaces with content that would pry them open, virtually chipping at the ideological stronghold. As Taghizadeh notes in her reflection on Iranian video art, "video was not simply a medium. It was a space."[24]

In the aftermath of Woman Life Freedom, it becomes increasingly evident that fighting for women's rights within the Islamic Republic's legal system, which is rooted in Sharia Law

[22]Andrea Duranti, 'The Green Screen: Neda and the Lost Voices,' *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), 1344–1370: URL: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1554/930 , accessed 14 November 2026.

[23] These goals and expectations are outlined in an anonymous, open-ended survey of 26 Iranian women conducted in September 2022 and presented in the study by Kelly-Ann Allen, Saeed Pahlevasharif, Shiqi Dong, and Steven Roberts, 'Being a Woman in Iran: Lived Constraints, Desired Change, and Calls for Allyship,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 117 (2026), URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2026.103326, last accessed October 25, 2026.

[24] Jinoos Taghizadeh, 'Making Art in the Void: Iranian Women Artists between Repression and Creation,' presentation in S4P (Science for Peace) Zoom session, *Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Dissobedience , Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression*, June 10, 2026; transcript published in this issue of *Matrix*.

and privileges men in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, faces the dilemma of Lyotard's *différend*, indicating an unresolved conflict in which the parties involved operate under unreconcilable sets of rules, causing "the misrecognition" indicated in the opening quote of this essay.[25] They operate in different registers, which intersect during sociopolitical upheavals like the uprisings discussed in this study. In their aftermath, "We're in a very weak phase, a period of reaction. Yet philosophy thought it had done with the problem of origins. It was no longer a question of starting or finishing. The question was rather, what happens "in between"?[26] Systemic changes, even if not immediately detectable, occur in between movements. The 2026 information blackout marks a watershed moment, returning resistance to grassroots organizing. Despite its apparent ephemerality, video art remains a resilient, enduring medium, supported by advances in digital image production and circulation, and capable of shapeshifting to whatever communication channels open in the future. It holds a mirror up to the ongoing struggle for women's rights and a democratic society.

Biography

Dr. Sandra Skurvida is an art historian and curator working in contemporary art and media. She has published extensively on art and information exchange with Iran, curated numerous video screenings worldwide, and convened an international symposium, 'Iran: Art and Discourse,' at the Asia Society, New York. She teaches at FIT-SUNY.

Illustrations

1. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *A Performance for a Nazr*, *A Nazr for a Performance*, 2003. Performance documentation, b&w photography by Ahmad Kechechian. Courtesy of the Artist.
2. Anahita Razmi, in collaboration with Hasti Goudarzi, *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011. Video installation, 12 video loops, 18' 11'' each, 2011. The Emdash Award 2011 / Commissioned by Frieze Foundation for Frieze Projects 2011. Video stills. Courtesy of the Artist.
3. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *Good Night*, 2009. Single-channel video, 22'. Video still. Courtesy of the Artist.
4. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *Fatness upon Fatness-100*, 2017. Single-channel video, 30'. Video stills. Courtesy of the Artist.
5. Anahita Razmi, *آسمان تقسیم‌ناپذیر* (*The Indivisible Sky*), 2025. Video Installation, stills. Courtesy of the Artist.

[25] See note #1.
[26] Gilles Deleuze, 'Mediators,' *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, Columbia University Press, 1995), 121-134.

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