

پولتن سنجلاس

Theory of Survival: Fabrications was organized by Taraneh Hemami at Southern Exposure Gallery in San Francisco from September 5 to October 25, 2014, with Morehshin Allahyari, Ali Dadgar, Ala Ebtekar, Amir H. Fallah, Arash Fayezi, Hushidar Mortezaie, Gelare Khoshgozaran, Sanaz Mazinani, Amitis Motevalli, Haleh Niazmand, Azin Seraj and Taravat Talepasand.

Historical Memory as Aesthetic Practice: Iranian Diasporic Artists Interpret a Revolutionary Archive.

Manijeh Nasrabadi

If remembering is always a subjective act then it is also always a political act, for the selectivity of memory (including that which is forgotten) can be understood as an individual, unpredictable response to multiple relations of power. When it comes to traumatic events—such as revolution, dislocation, and war—such responses are matters of survival; some people work hard to forget while others cling to moments in the past as if their lives depended on never letting go. Sometimes memory is unruly, refusing to submit to the will of the conscious mind, like a restless ghost with its own agenda. One way or another, truths are shaped through this disjointed relationship with the past. Conclusions are drawn about what was and what might have been, and each has political implications for the stance one takes towards the future.

Theory of Survival: Fabrications turns the politics of memory into both a research question and an aesthetic challenge. Thirteen diasporic Iranian artists from different generations and backgrounds were invited to engage with an archive of the Iranian Students Association (ISA), the anti-Shah student movement that mobilized thousands of young people in the U.S. throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Though the ISA was involved in the



Above, from left to right: Dozd Bazaar, by Hushidar Mortezaie; I stand with, by Amitis Motevalli; Revolusign, by Ali Dadgar; Below: Theory of Survival: Fabrications; Architectural Design by H. Majd Design Group; at Southern Exposure Gallery, Fall 2014, San Francisco, CA

anti-racist and anti-Vietnam war organizing that shook American society, this movement is virtually unknown among those who study U.S. social history of that era.

Like many American activists, the ISA was deeply influenced by anti-colonial revolutions across the Third World, especially those in China, Cuba, and Vietnam. A significant number of its members went on to join underground leftist parties, returning to Iran to participate in the 1978–79 revolution. Despite nuanced differences in ideology and strategy, these parties overwhelmingly supported Khomeini's rise to power, never imagining that the faction he led would soon utilize the resources of the newly formed state apparatus to hunt them down one by one. The violence was extreme, practically eradicating an entire generation of Marxists. The Left's miscalculation of Khomeini's intentions and of its own role in the revolution has been used to discredit its legacy and to cut later generations off from its radical genealogy. Silence was often all that remained—the silence of off-





Top: Theory of Survival Gift Shop, by Taraneh Hemami; at Fabrications, Southern Exposure Gallery, Fall 2014

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cial histories (in both the U.S. and in Iran) that represent the revolution as “Islamic” in a monolithic and axiomatic sense, and the silence of those struggling to hold their heads above an ocean of grief.

The former ISA members who survived and returned to the U.S. found themselves among a growing population of exiles, many of whom held the anti-Shah student movement partly to blame for creating the conditions which forced them to leave. Pro-Shah sympathies predominant among the post-79 Iranian immigrants, and the virulent anti-Iranian sentiment that swept U.S. society in the 1980s, left little room for the public mourning of martyred comrades. Nor was there space to express the anti-imperialist fervor that had animated the ISA and that was now wielded by the Islamic Republic to justify its persecution of dissidents. Anyone who opposed its policies was labeled a Western-backed spy, a threat to the self-determination of the Iranian people. The word “revo-

Right: Activist Uniform, Dozd Bazaar/Bootleg Identities, by Hushidar Mortezaie; at Fabrications, Southern Exposure, Fall 2014

lution” itself was cleansed of its oppositional connotations and invested with the disciplinary authority of the state that ruled in its name.

If feelings of guilt, despair, isolation and disorientation made it difficult for the leftist veterans of the revolutionary moment to speak about their aspirations and losses, the generation that came after was also denied any kind of collective, public reckoning with this legacy—if they knew about it at all. Hence the significance of *Fabrications*, which encourages personal encounters with an ISA archive and collects them in one place. Assembling these individual installations in a group show format highlights the heterogeneity of diasporic engagements with—and relationships to—a shared traumatic past, as each artist makes a distinct statement about what it means to look back. At the same time, however, the multiplicity of images and sounds, the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary cultural references, and the diversity of aesthetic sensibilities generates a milieu in which the viewer can become immersed, drawn first to one display and then another based on whatever catches the eye—much like in a bazaar.

This is intentional, of course, as the artistic visionary behind the project, Taraneh Hemami, set out to make a pop-up bazaar full of objects that blur the line between art and commodity, harnessing the ambivalence, irony and provocation of the Pop Art tradition. The viewer is invited to touch each object as a consumer would examine the merchandise in a shop, attaching complex desires to its form and function, imagining oneself wearing or using it in one’s everyday life, inspecting the item up close for possible purchase. It is this closer inspection that disrupts the comfortable familiarity of a shopping experience and offers instead a confrontation with an archive of pain and suffering.

The red sequins on that glittering jacket cut like something Michael Jackson might have worn on stage, turn out to be Houshidar Mortezaie’s sartorial representations of bullet wounds oozing blood. That elegant necklace adorning a mannequin in Haleh Niazmand’s “2 Die 4” booth features a pendant craft-

ed to look like a round piece of flesh pierced by a bullet. It is worth pointing out that both of these artists have family ties to the Tudeh era of the 1940s, when Iran experienced the growth of a mass communist party for the first time. This longer genealogy of radicalism appears in Niazmand’s work in the form of handwritten poetry by famous dissident writers such as Forugh Farrokhzad and Khosrow Golsorkhi, found among her father’s papers and now reproduced as text stitched into the fabric of her elegant chiffon dresses. Mortezaie includes selections from his father’s archive of Tudeh-era works by leftist literary figures such as Nima Yushij and Samad Behrangi, whose faces are printed on pillows with ropes tied around their necks. Though they did not live to see the events of 1979, Yushij and Behrangi nonetheless helped to radicalize that generation of revolutionaries.

Since much of the ISA’s activity was focused on exposing U.S. support for the torture and execution of dissidents in Iran under the Shah, it should come as no surprise that blood was a central motif in the group’s printed propaganda. Hemami engages with this repetition through formal reproduction of everyday objects; for example, she copied a graphic of a single drop of blood from an ISA pamphlet and produced refrigerator magnets, and she silkscreened a more elaborate glob of multiple drips onto throw pillows and handkerchiefs. As if to belabor the point—and evoke the rhetorical style of the movement itself—she manufactured and displayed the variously shaped drops and drips found throughout the archive as glossy, candy-apple red wall ornaments, their ghostly shadows hinting at the horrors they were initially intended to represent.

Not every artist makes such explicit use of the images found in the books, pamphlets, and leaflets that make up the ISA archive. Indeed, several artists work with different archives altogether, such as Moreshein Allahyari’s “#AsYouScrollDown,” which recreates the immediacy and urgency of the 2009 “green” uprising in Iran by collecting the 100 most retweeted tweets from those days of hope and turning them into a vinyl audio recording. As you listen to the move-

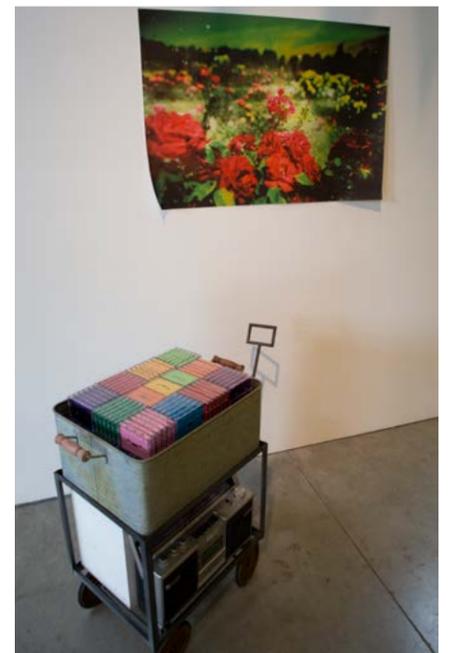
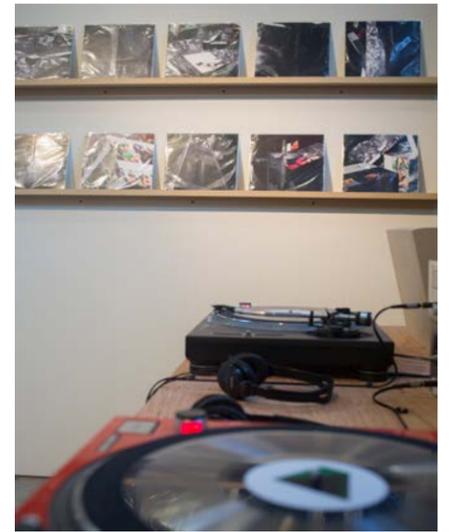
Fabrications confronts the viewer with a collection of memories that move through different moments in time, fabricating the objects necessary to get us there and back.

ment unfold through the digital ephemera that helped to sustain it, the memory of what might have been is preserved, much in the way the yellowing pages of ISA literature constitute evidence of a different vision of revolutionary transformation that never came to pass. Ala Ebtekar, inspired by the exhibition’s invitation to engage with a revolutionary archive, delved into his own family history and discovered that his relatives had collected and maintained an audio archive of revolutionary songs and news broadcasts from 1979. He remixed these tracks onto cassette tapes—the mass technology of the time that was widely used to spread anti-Shah propaganda—sometimes adding his own voiceover as English translation, in order to “(re) consider the moment when the future of Iran was as hopeful as a high school mix-tape.”

It is perhaps this desire for reappraisal of the impulse towards revolutionary transformation that forms the most coherent theme of the exhibit and that approaches something like a politics of remembering. Rather than a collective memory of a hidden history, *Fabrications* confronts the viewer with a collection of memories that move through different moments in time, fabricating the objects necessary to get us there and back. Ali Dadgar’s wall of protest placards seems to reaffirm the need for mass action today by presenting images and slogans referencing the current moment of U.S. drone warfare and Israeli occupation of Palestine, while simultaneously engaging in a critique of slogans that express the nationalist ideologies of both the U.S. and Iran.

The shrewd ability to look askance at each of these nation-states is what makes *Fab-*

Top to bottom: #AsYouScrollDown by Moreshein Allahyari; 2Die4 by Haleh Niazmand; Concurrency, by Azin Seraj; Mixed Tapes, by Ala Ebtekar; at Fabrications, Southern Exposure, Fall 2014





cultural memory.

Certainly context plays a role in the discussion—given the fraught tensions of the site of the gift shop, it makes sense that the cheese plate, or another item for that matter, would become a loaded topic. Had the plate been presented in an art gallery, it seems unlikely that it would have generated the same controversy. Art often enables difficult conversations about challenging sub-

jects by virtue of being art, as opposed to functional or ordinary objects—this was demonstrated by artist Michael Rakowitz's 2011 project "Spoils", a culinary-political performance piece utilizing plates purchased on eBay and believed to have belonged to Saddam Hussein.

As a result of news coverage about Rakowitz's art project, the plates were returned to Iraq at the request of the State Department, but not before they were seen by some 700 viewers and participants. Seen as art, the cultural significance of the plates in Rakowitz's performance were regarded completely differently than they were in another context—a similar kind of impact and accessibility can be found in Hemami's art projects featuring materials that

would also be regarded with greater controversy in another setting. The objects in Hemami's booth at Southern Exposure, titled "Theory of Survival Souvenir Shop", challenge many of the same conventions at play in the gnarly debates around the objects for sale in the 9/11 museum gift shop or the plates in Rakowitz's performance. Indeed, Hemami's work asks difficult questions about both commerce and cultural memory. Her ceramic plates with pixelated portraits of "martyrs" of the Iranian Left—some 4,000 executed activists—are presented alongside decorative throw pillows and refrigerator magnets depicting oozing blood. All of the objects are beautifully crafted, while simultaneously evoking disturbing narratives.

Images from the Iranian Students' historic archive reflect the universal language of resistance and speak to many recent political upheavals, including the global Occupy Movement; the demonstrations in Turkey's Taksim Square; the protests that erupted in Ferguson, MO, after the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American man; and Hong Kong's youth-led Umbrella Revolution. The image of a raised fist is a recurring icon of solidarity—it can be found throughout *Theory of Survival: Fabrications*, just as it can be seen in images of protests around the globe today. The fist motif is evident in Hemami's work, including powder-coated aluminum wall sculptures and a free rubber-stamp station where visitors can stamp their own cards. For the artist, who was born and raised in Tehran, the project is a path towards understanding her own obscured personal history and a way to place these stories in the broad history of activism.

Collective action runs a thread through Hemami's larger body of work, both in theory and in practice. Her ongoing

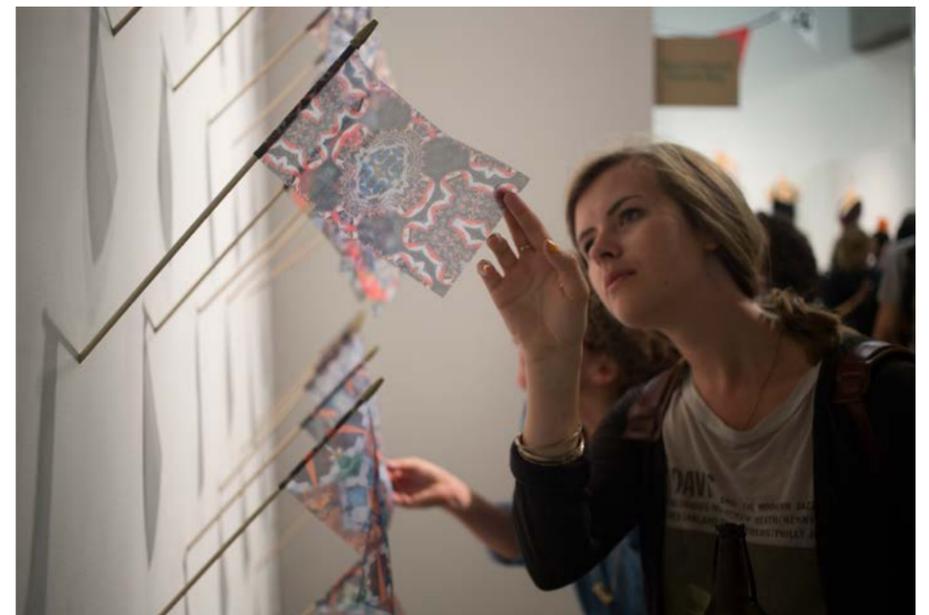
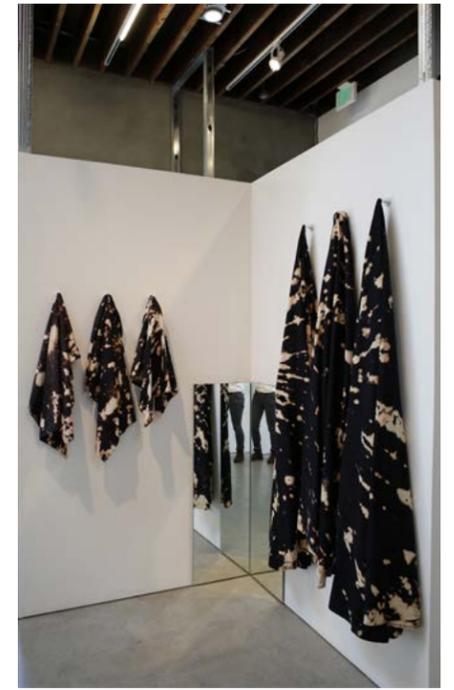
explorations into underground Iranian political dissent are predicated on collective systems of institutional support and she has worked in residence in numerous institutions around the Bay Area. While artist-in-residence at California College of the Arts' Center for Art and Public Life in 2005–2006, she put out a call to the Bay Area Iranian community to gather archival material—the archive Iranian Students Association of Northern California was brought forth in the process.

She later used another opportunity at the Lab to organize the resulting archive, which is now catalogued in the Persian Studies department of the Library of Congress. During this project, Hemami became aware of the fracturing between armed resistance and nonviolent tactics in the Leftist movement leading up to the revolution. From this, her recurring investigations into "theories of survival" have spun an ongoing multimedia portrait of modern dissent.

"The project at large," she said, "is to organize a dialogue between different generations of activists. My interest lies less in the details of theory, but rather is focused on the many thousands of students who were politically active in the student movement." Hemami's commitment to this incendiary moment in Iranian history extends the work of her revolutionary predecessors while expanding the audience for stories of tactical resistance.

As the tools for global amplification become both more sophisticated and more accessible, historic dissent finds renewed relevance, as it is adapted for newer technologies. Moreshin Allahyari's project for Hemami's bazaar is titled "#AsYouScollDown" and features vinyl records pressed with the top 100 re-tweeted posts during the recent protests known as Iran's Green Movement 2009–2010. Allahyari's records demonstrate a shared sensibility with many of the offerings in *Fabrications*, while tapping into newer social networks and means of distribution, as did Dadgar's orchestrated cell phone performance.

By reconsidering a significant cultu-



Top left: Theory of Survival Gift Shop, by Taraneh Hemami; above: Playing backgammon with Convergences, by Gelare Khoshgozaran; projected image: Why are Wet Materials Transparent, by Arash Fayezi; at Fabrications, Southern Exposure Gallery, Fall 2014

Top right: Failure, by Amir H. Fallah; Center right: Convergences, by Gelare Khoshgozaran; Below: Conference of the Birds (Flags), by Sanaz Mazinani; at Fabrications, Southern Exposure Gallery, Fall 2014

Top: Head Theologian, Dozd Bazaar/Bootleg Identities, by Hushidar Mortezaie; Middle: Anonymous (Plates), by Taraneh Hemami; Bottom: Connecting History to the Present; workshop in collaboration with Arts at CIIS, facilitated by Manijeh Nasrabadi, Milton Reynolds, Pireeni Sundaralingam and Ignacio Valero; October 5, 2014, at Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco, CA

al moment in Iranian history, Hemami's *Theory of Survival: Fabrications* provides a new lens through which to consider present-day global protest and the forms it might take. In a time when peaceful assembly and civil disobedience are often met with brute force, Hemami's work provides a timely reminder: A song, or a tweet, as it were, might be innocuous on its own, but met with the power of a collective chorus, it has the power to change history.

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Select material from this essay was extracted from my article titled "Reconsidering Resistance: Taraneh Hemami at the Luggage Store," published by KQED Arts on January 25, 2013. The original is archived online at http://www2.kqed.org/arts/2013/01/25/reconsidering_resistance_taraneh_hemami_at_the_luggage_store/ (Sourced December 3, 2014).

Bottom left: #AsYouScrollDown, by Morehshin Allahyari; Bottom right: Concurrency, by Azin Seraj; Top: Stamping table, Theory of Survival Gift Shop, by Taraneh Hemami; at Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco, Fall 2014

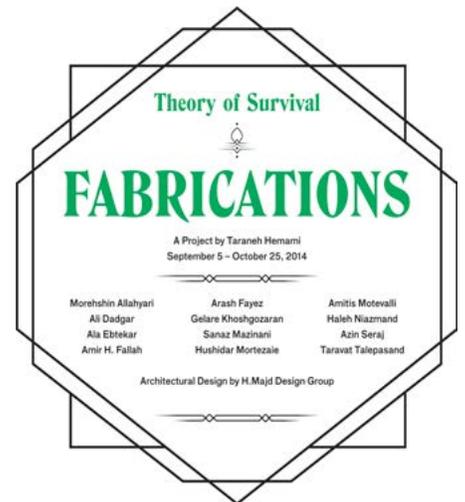


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Theory of Survival projects engage with a historical archive belonging to the library of the Iranian Students Association of Northern California (1964-1982), recently acquired by the Library of Congress (2009).

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Above: Original design for Theory of Survival: Fabrications, by MacFadden & Thorpe, Fall 2014

