Your Body is my Peace Flag

Azadeh E. Zaghi

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Drawing from her personal experiences, Zaghi traces a history of resistance and protest. From her birth (shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution) to today and the ongoing Zhina/Mahsa Amini protests, she looks at how the violence of state control is inscribed upon the bodies of women and protesters; and the marks that acts of defiance and resistance can leave upon these bodies.

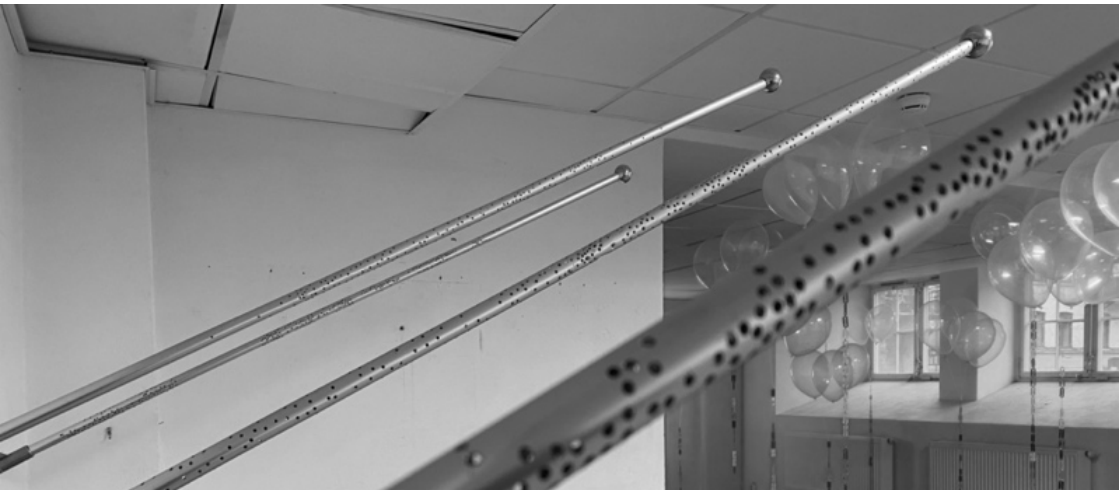
Zaghi's artworks inhabit a world of tensions. Like the bodies they represent, the works are caught within the maelstrom of revolution, caught between the threat of violence and the need for freedom, between fragility and strength, pain and poetry, hopelessness and hope.

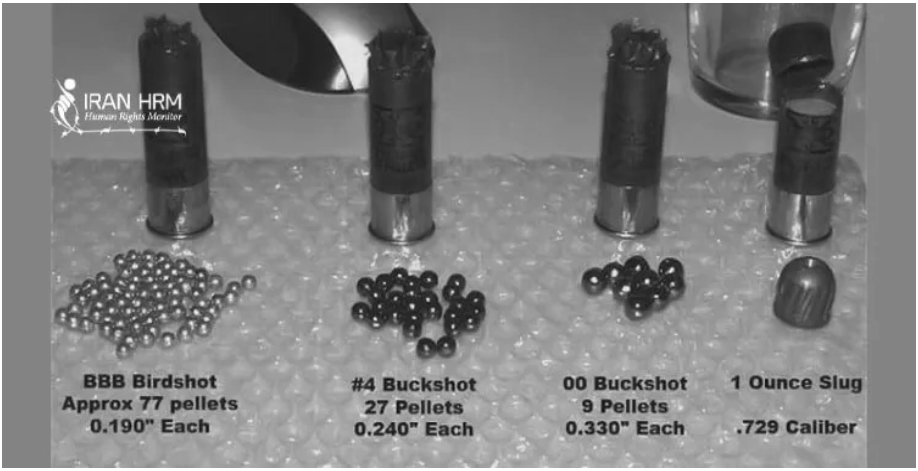
The tension between the desire for peace and the reality of violence has never been felt more strongly in Zaghi's work as in *Your Body Is My Peace Flag* (2022), which emerges from an ongoing artistic research endeavour initated in 2018. These peace flags are

entirely stripped of their cloth, leaving their metal poles exposed, as if naked – the flagpoles, in turn, are covered in bullet holes, as if nearly torn apart by a hail of machine gun fire.

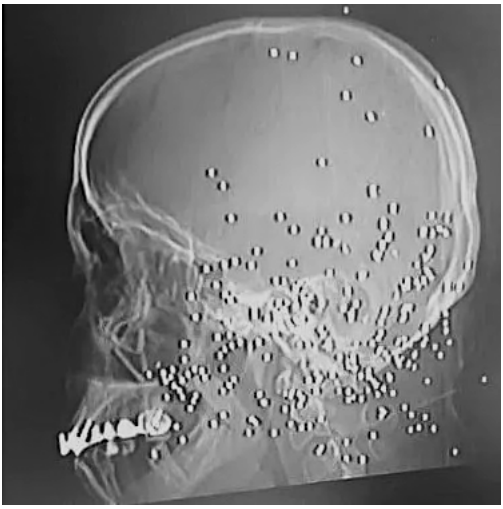
The flagpoles reflect images of protesters' bodies shot by security forces with "non-lethal" pellet shotguns. Often, these injuries are permanent and, indeed, *lethal*, as the shots are aimed at the protesters' chest, head, and eyes. Even injuries to non-vital parts of the body can lead to dangerous infections, as protesters avoid seeking medical help at hospitals where they run the risk of being arrested immediately after their release. These "non-lethal" shotguns are only part of the arsenal used by Iranian security forces however, which includes explicitly lethal weapons such as automatic and even sniper rifles. The message of the authorities is clear: peace, for them, will only be achieved when every single dissenting voice lies shot on the ground.

However: although damaged, the flagpoles remain. Without the flag itself, the symbol of peace, the flagpoles appear almost threatening, like spears in a military formation. The spirit of the protestors is not broken, their rage has not faded into despair. On the contrary: the state's violent suppression can only be answered by organised resistance.





Caliber 12 shotguns can fire multiple types of bullets: Birdshot, Buckshot, and Slug. The shotguns used in recent protests by Iran's security forces are usually Pump-Action M2 and Benelli M2.



Photograph of wounded protester by Iranian-American physician Dr. Kayvan Mirhadi, chief of internal medicine at the Clifton Springs Hospital in New York. As protesters avoid hospitals, they turn to medical professionals via social media for advice. Mirhadi said he receives around 500 such messages daily.

About the artist:

Azadeh E. Zaghi is a Gothenburg-based artist, curator, and educator. Born in Tehran, Iran in 1981, she has been active in the Gothenburg art scene since 2008. In her prolific career, she has participated in and organised a large variety of artistic and educational projects across Sweden, with a strong focus on issues of representation, democracy, accessibility, inclusion, social engagement, and pedagogy. She is currently a board member of *KMK (Konstnärs Mammas Kollektiv)* and has served as artistic director for *Kulturstråket Bergsjön* and board member of both *Konstepidemin* and the *ICIA – Institute for Contemporary Ideas and Art*.

Notable exhibitions include:
POM! POM!, Blåstället Konsthall , (2023)
L*iving in World War III*, Konstepidemin (2022)
CrossWorlds, 3:e Våningen (2019), *The Times it Takes,* Skånes Konstförening (2019), Galleri Box (2019), *Walls Re-Visited, Re-Edited*, Gallery Konstepidemin (2018), *Keys of* H*eaven*, ICIA Konsthall (2016), *Economy*, Gallery 54 (2016), *Shame: An Evening with Performance*, KNIPSU (Bergen, 2014).

This essay was originally written and published for the exhibition Born to be wild, *which took place at KonstrumNU!, November 2022, and in which the work* Your Body is my Peace Flag *was first shown.*

To witness. To remember.
Alexandra Papademetriou

Personal narratives have particular importance throughout Zaghi's work, as – to paraphrase a well-worn saying – it is through the personal that the political is revealed. Many of her works reveal stories of migration, of borders, of conflict and war, of institutional power and its abuse. In other words: of *history* in the making.

History is what I want to touch on first, here. Our shared interest in history is part of what brought Zaghi and I together almost a year ago – or, to be more precise, our shared interest in *history-making*.

In my work, I often try to highlight histories that were obscured, destroyed, or never allowed to be recorded in the first place; and the feeling of loss and of a particular kind of *weightlessness* that comes with believing yourself untethered from the flow of human history. I occupy the particular position of being both Greek and a lesbian – meaning that on

one hand I come from a culture whose lifeblood is its ancient history (which is elevated to an almost sacred status), and on the other hand I belong to a group whose existance has been systematically erased from recorded history (we were "unthinkable" and were to *remain* "unthinkable"). It is from this contrast that I began to ask: who decides *who* is part of history? And how can those of us who have been rejected by historiography find our own way to record our lives, find our own way to be remembered?
For Zaghi, the starting point for a work will often be a single, innocuous object (such a poster in a child's bedroom, in the case of *Born to be wild*, or a keychain, or a soft toy) which will trigger a memory of something much, much larger. The truth is that the everyday objects surrounding us do, indeed, carry our memories, our personalities, our stories: and by extension, the stories of the times we live in, our cultures, the political struggles of our societies. A ceramic bowl in an apartment in downtown Gothenburg is as much a piece of history as a ceramic bowl from 2200 BCE in a museum display in Tehran. Zaghi sees that we are always, inescapably, part of history – and that we are, in a sense, surrounded by an archive of our own epoch. For her, the question is: who decides *what* becomes history? And, more importantly: who decides on the course of history right now, who has the power to direct events?

And, I would argue, these questions are particularly important for all of us to ask in this present moment. We're not only living through a time of global unrest and escalating tensions, but we're also living, for the first time in recorded history, in an era in which we, all of us, *can record history*. Most of us have a device which can photograph, record, share an event with the entire world. And while the online platforms through which we can share our history-in-the-

making are highly controlled, we are still nonetheless so much more empowered than we were ever before. And this power is, of course, why so many of us have been excluded from history – history is a weapon. To be allowed to remember the struggles of those who came before you is to understand the significance of your position today, and more importantly, to continue the struggle that has been passed down to you.

This is what is happening today in Iran with the Zhina/Mahsa Amini protests. Two women were brave enough to report on Amini's murder, despite the regime's efforts to conceal it, just like it has done countless times before. Women were brave enough to share the news across the country. And they remembered the decades of oppression, the history of violence.

Violence itself leaves a record of its own history, usually under clothes or behind closed hospital doors, where it stays hidden. To make this record public is, in a way, to expose one's own vulnerability – which is why it's so difficult to come forward. But we can't afford to forget that when we publicly talk about violence, when we record what has happened to us, we are in fact exposing the perpetrator, the oppressor. And, after all, the marks that violence leaves upon a body inscribe both a history of the violence, but also a history of resistance against this exact violence. The scars left by pellet shotguns on the bodies of protesters are a record of both the protest and its suppression. The scars, and the photographs of the scars, *bear witness* to what happened, of what is continuing to happen right now.

And this here is where I truly want to focus here: on *witnessing*.

As summarised by Daniela Mansbach in her paper *Witnessing as Activism: Watching the Other at the Israeli Checkpoints* (2015):

> *The term witnessing has a double meaning. First, it refers to "eye-witnessing," a practice with a juridical connotation, which is based on the premise of accuracy and truth.* [...] *Second, the term refers to "bearing witness," the political act of testifying to what cannot be seen, of making sense of personal suffering and oppression.*

Through these works, Zaghi directs an unflinching gaze onto the cruelty of this legacy of control, and *bears witness*. But more importantly, she asks us to direct our own gaze towards the injustices taking place right now, and to *bear witness ourselves*.

To bear witness is an inherently political act. To witness is to fight against disinformation. To bear witness to an act of violence is to fight against the dehumanisation of the victim, to remember those that the political order wanted to erase from existence, to challenge the mechanisms of oppression. And in bearing witness together lies the potential to radically transform society.

The protests which quickly evolved into a national revolt were sparked in the first place because of those few who were brave enough to publicly bear witness to the torture which lead to Amini's death. Even now, over four weeks later, alongside the chant *Zan, Zendegī, Āzādī (Woman, Life, Freedom)*, protesters are calling upon us to *Say her name, Mahsa Amini*. To remember her. And, through remembering her, to remember all the women like her, who were killed for not conforming to oppressive laws. To fight, so that no other woman has to suffer the same fate. To quote Mansbach again:

> *[B]earing witness is a central tool for reconstructing subjectivity, as well as for challenging the existing social and political order by redefining who has a voice in society.*

The works of *Born to be wild* ask us to not turn away. They ask us to bear witness, and to remember: not only the violence, the oppression, the injustice, but also the resistance. The hope, which has survived despite all odds. To try to remember each life lost, each body injured – to reject the normalisation of death. To remember not only the pain and the anger, but also the bravery of each woman, man, and child who fought for a better future risking their life. After all, the body bears the weight of oppression, it is that which is marked by injury and threatened with death – but it is also that through which strength, agency and defiance are manifested.

About the author:

Alexandra Papademetriou (b. 1994) is a Greek/English artist and researcher currently based in Gothenburg, where she recently earned her MFA in Fine Art from HDK-Valand. Through her research work she aims to raise questions about the role of artists in shaping culture and heritage, and the risk of this labour being exploited or instrumentalised. She is currently a post-master student at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Her work has been shown in Greece, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Poland, Serbia, and Turkey.

Notable exhibitions include:
...even in another time, Page 28 (Malmö, 2022), *Remember when this used to be fun?*, Vulkano (2022), L*anguage in Common*, Belgrade Youth Biennial (2021), *Occupy Atopos #FYTA,* Atopos CVC (Athens, 2017), *Documena / Waiting For The Barbarians,* 6th Athens Biennial (2017).