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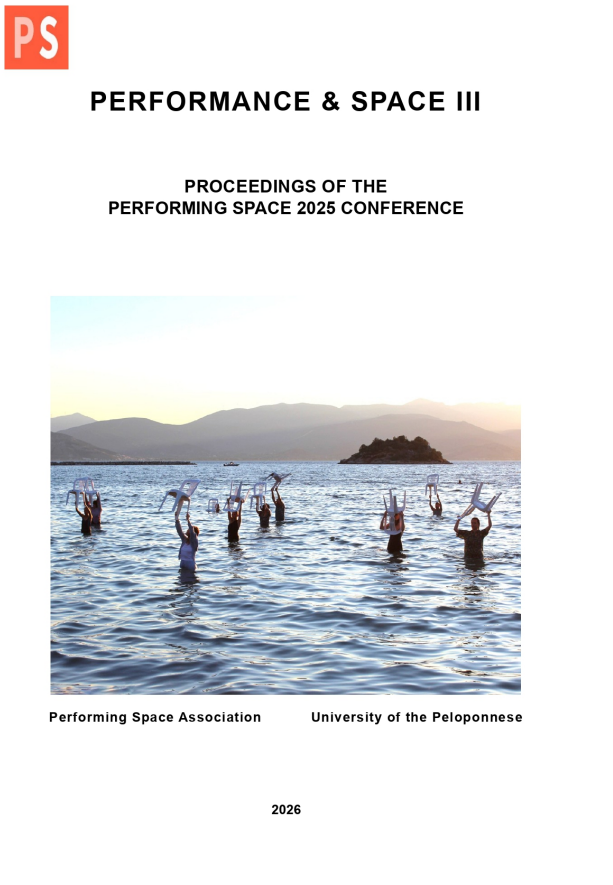

Staging Resistance: The Girl of Enghelab Street and the Theatricality of Public Space in Iran

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30

Staging Resistance: The Girl of Enghelab Street and the Theatricality of Public Space in Iran

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Abstract

On 27 December 2017, during mass demonstrations against Iran's economic crisis, a video of a young woman standing silently on a utility box while waving a white headscarf on a stick captured widespread attention. Among the crowd of chanting protesters and passersby on Tehran's Enghelab (Revolution) Street, her motionless figure and unspoken resistance ignited national and international discourse. Over time, she became known as the "Girl of Enghelab Street," and her act came to symbolise a turning point in Iran's women's movement and broader anti-government resistance.

This seemingly simple gesture was politically and performatively complicated. Its significance lies not only in the visual power of the act but also in how it changed the spatial, social, and symbolic dynamics of Iranian public life. Through this act, the protester transformed a corner of Tehran into a theatrical space of resistance by using the very medium that the state wanted to regulate: her body. This article analyses the gesture through the lens of spatial politics, spectatorship, theatricality, and feminist/queer theory, highlighting its legacy from 2017 to the Women, Life, Freedom movement of 2022.

Keywords: performance, protest, theatricality, space, Iran

The Significance of Space: Enghelab Street as Stage

The fact that this act occurred on Enghelab Street was not incidental. “Enghelab,” meaning revolution, is both a name and a historical archive. Located in the heart of Tehran, this five-kilometre-long street is home to universities, bookstores, performance venues and, historically, sites of political protest. It has become a powerful symbol of protest, particularly for women. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have gathered there at several key moments to resist gender-based laws, including compulsory wearing of the hijab.

By performing on this street, the protester engaged with a space already charged with historical memory and political meaning. She mounted a utility box that is an everyday urban object, and transformed it into a stage. By doing so, she altered the space’s function from ordinary to theatrical, and from neutral to symbolic. The scarf, the stick, her elevated position, and most importantly, her body all became symbols. And in theatre, as in protest, everything visible becomes a signifier.

Gesture and Theatricality: Transforming the Everyday

Although her act was improvised, it had all the features of a political performance. Following Sholette’s (2022) and Khademi’s (2023) framework, we can understand this gesture as an improvised performance by a “non-artist” — in other words, a civilian engaging in symbolic action without professional artistic training. These performances do not aim to represent life but disrupt it. They introduce an element of estrangement into everyday life, enabling spectators to view ordinary actions, such as removing a headscarf, as political gestures.

The protester's silence and isolation enhanced this effect. She kept her hands raised and away from her ears to intentionally separate herself from the surrounding chaos. Her posture suggested deliberate non-participation in the ongoing protest chants by creating a powerful visual contrast. For a moment, the public demonstration got a second dimension: an internal critique of gendered spatial control within the broader anti-regime discourse.

This is where theatricality becomes essential. Unlike theatre, where performance spaces are pre-arranged, protest performances often occur spontaneously and must create their own stages. Therefore, the act of staging resistance in a non-theatrical, high-traffic space like Enghelab Street relies on the transformation of that space into something extraordinary. As Dolan (2001) has suggested, theatricality is not bound to institutions but emerges from the friction between performance and spectatorship, between presence and reception. Without this spatial shift, the act would risk blending into the everyday. It is the “spatial” rupture that gives it a political dimension.

The Role of Spectatorship: Completing the Act

It is crucial to note that the protester had reportedly enacted the gesture at least three times before, but it was only on this specific occasion that the image circulated widely and entered the public discourse. Why? Because the transformation of space into theatrical, political space is not complete without spectatorship. The spectators — whether co-present on the street or virtual via social media — performed the essential function of reception. They activated the gesture as political meaning.

Spectatorship was multi-layered in this case. We can categorize spectators into three groups: the protester the passers-by, and the oppressive forces. The protesters were those marching against economic injustice that was the initial catalyst of the December–January uprising, often referred to as the "DeyMah" uprising. They represented a movement not initially concerned with gender, but through this act, the "Girl of Enghelab Street" linked gender justice to economic and political demands. She created a space within the uprising for women's rights, which had otherwise been absent in its discourse.

The passers-by — students, workers, commuters — represented the everyday public of Tehran. Although they were not politically engaged in the protest, their physical presence helped stage the contrast between everyday life and protest. Their gaze, even if momentary or accidental, allowed the gesture to exist within the public sphere. They were the unintentional audience without which the act would remain unseen and untheatrical.

The third group, the repressive forces, included police and military agents, could be regarded as antagonists in the theatrical frame. Although they were not the intended audience, they played a fundamental role as the object of resistance. Their reaction — arresting Vida Movahed and later other women who repeated the act — reinforced the gesture's meaning by supplying it with visible consequences. The presence of an antagonistic gaze made the performance dangerous, and in doing so, made it effective and powerful.

Feminist and Queer Implications: Blurring the Public/Private Divide

At the core of the Girl of Enghelab Street's act is a feminist and potentially queer intervention into spatial politics. The Islamic Republic's socio-spatial logic is deeply gendered, relying on a sharp division between public (male) and private (female) spaces. Women are depicted "private" even when physically present in public; the hijab functions as a spatial marker, and an ideological veil that allows their passage into male-coded zones while keeping them symbolically restricted.

By removing the hijab, Mohaved disrupted this restriction. She collapsed the boundary between public and private, not only through physical exposure, but also through symbolic

resistance. Her unveiled presence declared her right to public space as a full, visible citizen. In this sense, the act was feminist in content and queer in form. Following feminist psychoanalytic theory and object-relations theory, binary thinking is often a function of male-dominated systems of socialisation. Mohaved's act blurred the following binaries: male/female, public/private, obedience/defiance. Importantly, her act was not rooted in identity but in method: it queered space by challenging the norms of presence. Rather than asserting a new identity, her act created a rupture in the masculine logic of public space by disrupting the very conditions that make identities visible and recognisable.

Legacy and Repetition: From 2017 to the Women, Life, Freedom Movement

The gesture did not remain isolated. In the months following Mohaved's arrest, at least twenty-nine women across Iranian cities re-enacted her act by climbing utility boxes and waving white scarves, despite the risk of arrest, imprisonment, and violence. These repetitions transformed a singular act into a collective gesture. Over time, the "Girls of Enghelab Street" became a recognised symbol of resistance, foreshadowing the mass uprisings of 2022 under the slogan of "Women, Life, Freedom."

In these later protests, the body continued to serve as the central site of protest: women cut their hair, burned their hijabs, and challenged the state's control over space and visibility. These were more confrontational acts, but they kept the symbolic core of the original gesture. What was once a solitary performance became a widespread language of resistance that affirmed the significance of bodily and spatial protest in authoritarian contexts.

Conclusion: The Politics of Space, Theatricality, and Embodied Resistance

In Iran's tightly controlled public sphere, the Girl of Enghelab Street's act marked a radical intervention. Through her silent, non-verbal performance, she transformed a corner of Tehran into a site of resistance, disrupting the spatial and ideological structures that govern gendered life. Her act was not only political in content but theatrical in form: it relied on space, gesture, and spectatorship to produce meaning. It challenged the hegemony of public space, disrupted binary thinking, and gestured towards a politics of embodiment that exceeds the boundaries of both art and activism.

In its feminist and queer refusal to accept spatial confinement, the act continues to resonate not just as a protest, but as a blueprint for how bodies can challenge power, how space can be reclaimed, and how spectatorship can help transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

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