

By Asma Mehan

Artistic Activism and Feminist Placemaking



شماره سه از بینهایت

LIBERTY

Artistic Activism and Feminist Placemaking in Iran's 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement

By Dr. Asma Mehan, Ph.D.

Abstract

In the realm of pixels and virtual spaces, the art of placemaking transcends physical confines, weaving a digital mosaic of voices and visions. Feminist digital placemaking emerges as a vibrant brushstroke on this canvas, painting online environments with the hues of inclusion, safety, and empowerment. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran, mirrored in the "Year of Hope" digital exhibition, showcases the transformative power of feminist digital placemaking in amplifying voices, knitting solidarity, and challenging oppressive narratives. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, sparked by the tragic demise of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, unfolds like a poignant narrative, with women scripting the chapters of resistance. This movement, a collage of courage and defiance, has found a digital stage in the "Year of Hope" exhibition, where each artwork tells a story, each pixel a testament to the unyielding spirit of Iranian women.

On the Ground



۱۴۰۱
مهر ماه
2022
september

Feminist Digital Placemaking



in the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran has galvanized global attention through its poignant use of digital media, highlighting the transformative power of feminist digital placemaking. This movement, ignited by the tragic death of Mahsa Amini, has transcended the physical streets of Iran to resonate within the digital realm, illustrating the capacity of digital spaces to both memorialize and mobilize.

Digitalization has radically altered the use of public space, sparking a robust academic discourse on the dualist and hybrid nature of networked technologies and their role in transforming political communication dynamics. Social media platforms, as evidenced by their use in movements like “Woman, Life, Freedom,” have become pivotal in sustaining mobilization efforts. These platforms act as contemporary ‘public megaphones,’ extending the reach of activists far beyond traditional movement boundaries and allowing for the rapid dissemination of information and the organization of protests.

The hybrid reality of social protests, consisting of both material and digital elements, redefines the very notion of a protest event. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement has exemplified this, with digital feminist placemaking at the heart of its strategy. This approach has enabled Iranian women to share their stories of defiance and to organize despite government - imposed internet blackouts.

Digital feminist placemaking is not confined to Iran; it is part of a worldwide phenomenon, with movements like #MeToo highlighting its global significance. These movements have utilized digital platforms to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for gender equality. In Iran, campaigns such as “My Stealthy Freedom” and “White Wednesdays” have seen women using social media to protest compulsory hijab laws, with activists like Vida Movahed, the girl of Revolution Street, becoming symbols of resistance.

Art and digital media have been instrumental in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, with artists utilizing digital platforms to express feminist beliefs and challenge traditional gender roles. These digital creations have fostered public awareness and supported women’s rights, underscoring the pivotal role of art in shaping public discourse on gender equality. Digital platforms, while empowering, also present challenges, including surveillance, censorship, and the potential spread of misinformation. Despite these risks, digital spaces have become indispensable tools for feminist activism, providing a venue for communication, mobilization, and organization. The long-term impact of these movements, particularly regarding their influence on public opinion and policy concerning women’s rights, remains a crucial area for further research.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran has effectively harnessed the power of digital

platforms to create a global dialogue on women’s rights and autonomy. By utilizing social media as a tool for activism, Iranian women have been able to transcend physical barriers and connect with supporters around the world. This digital solidarity has not only amplified their voices but has also created a sense of shared purpose and empowerment among participants. As digital activism continues to evolve, it is crucial to recognize the role of feminist digital placemaking in shaping contemporary social movements and advancing the cause of gender equality.

Feminist digital placemaking in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement represents a significant strategic shift against gender norms and discriminatory practices, particularly under authoritarian regimes.

By creatively leveraging online platforms, women have been able to assert their autonomy and advocate for change. This movement demonstrates the power of digital spaces to promote women’s rights and equality, contributing to a broader discourse on gender equality in Iran and beyond. The intersection of art, feminism, and digital activism continues to offer rich opportunities for scholarly exploration and is poised to make significant contributions to the discourse on women’s rights in the MENA region.

The 'Year of Hope' Exhibition as a Catalyst for Change

The "Year of Hope" exhibition stands as a testament to feminist digital placemaking, curating a virtual gallery of resilience and hope. Within this digital domain, social media platforms intertwine threads of information, weaving a tapestry of solidarity that transcends geographical boundaries. The artworks in the "Year of Hope" exhibition serve as digital murals, painting the landscape of the internet with the colors of resistance and the strokes of hope. Through the lens of art, digital campaigns transform the abstract into the tangible, turning the virtual into a canvas for change.

These platforms create sanctuaries in encrypted corners of the web, where voices can echo without fear, and stories can unfold without restraint. The "Year of Hope" exhibition thus becomes more than a gallery; it is a digital archive, preserving the memory of the movement and ensuring that the narrative of "Woman, Life, Freedom" is etched in the annals of history.

The "Year of Hope" exhibition illuminates the impact of feminist digital placemaking, bridging continents to create a global mosaic of support and unity. Artistic expression within the exhibition empowers voices, transforming the silent into the vocal, the invisible into the visible. The artworks spotlight Iran's human rights situation, drawing global attention to the struggle for freedom. The exhibition fosters a community of



Art Credit: "Woman, Life, Freedom.?" - Anonymous

artists, activists, and allies, united in their pursuit of a world where "Woman, Life, Freedom" is an achieved reality.

Feminist digital placemaking, as embodied by the "Year of Hope" exhibition, stands as a powerful testament to the role of art and digital spaces in shaping social movements. This digital canvas, imbued with stories of resistance and hope, offers a glimpse into the expansive potential of feminist digital activism to challenge oppressive regimes and weave a world that celebrates freedom, equality, and justice.

In addition to serving as a beacon for feminist activism in the digital age, the exhibition's role in the broader context of digital feminist movements is significant. By harnessing the narrative power of hashtags and the connectivity of social media platforms, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement has been able to reach a global audience.

This exemplifies the potential of digital placemaking to transform individual voices into a unified force for change. Each digital mural, illustration, and video transcends visual content, becoming a powerful narrative that shapes the internet's landscape with resistance and hope. These artworks become digital monuments, immortalizing the courage and defiance of Iranian women and inspiring others to join their movement.

Leveraging digital campaigns, the exhibition transforms abstract ideas into tangible actions. Online petitions and fundraising campaigns have mobilized resources and support, turning the virtual realm into a canvas for change and advocacy. In a world where physical gatherings can be fraught with danger, the digital realm offers encrypted corners and private forums where voices can echo without fear of persecution. These virtual safe spaces allow for the free exchange of ideas, strategies, and support, enabling the movement to flourish despite external threats.

"The 'Year of Hope' exhibition is not just a gallery of art; it is a dynamic, living archive of a movement that continues to inspire and mobilize activists around the world."

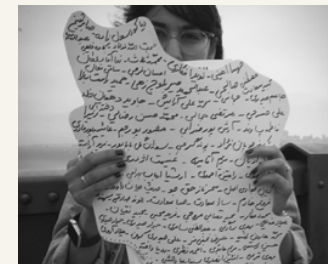
The "Year of Hope" exhibition also embraces interactive platforms and digital storytelling techniques to engage audiences more deeply. Virtual reality experiences, interactive timelines, and digital storytelling platforms allow visitors to immerse themselves in the stories of the movement, fostering empathy and understanding. By harnessing the power

of crowdsourcing to create collaborative art pieces that reflect the collective spirit of the movement, online platforms enable participants from around the world to contribute their art, stories, and voices, creating a tapestry of solidarity that transcends geographical boundaries.

Furthermore, the exhibition leverages digital tools to advocate for policy changes and raise awareness about the challenges faced by women in Iran. Through online webinars, podcasts, and social media campaigns, it engages with a broader audience, including policymakers, human rights organizations, and global citizens, to amplify the call for change.

By analyzing the artworks and narratives within the "Year of Hope" exhibition, it becomes clear that feminist digital placemaking is an essential strategy for effecting change. The exhibition not only showcases the resilience and hope of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement but also serves as a critical platform for advocating for gender equality and women's rights. It is a space where the collective strength of voices calling for change is amplified, and where the narrative of resistance is preserved for future generations. As such, the "Year of Hope" exhibition is not just a gallery of art; it is a dynamic, living archive of a movement that continues to inspire and mobilize activists around the world.

Art Credit: "For Freedom" - Anonymous





Selected Case Studies in the Context of “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

The “Year of Hope” exhibition presents a poignant collection of artworks that illuminate the spirit and resilience of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. These selected case studies offer a glimpse into the diverse range of artistic expressions inspired by the movement, showcasing the power of art as a tool for social change and advocacy. Each artwork serves as a visual narrative, capturing the essence of the movement and the challenges faced by women in Iran and beyond. From powerful symbols of resistance to evocative metaphors of resilience, these artworks convey a message of defiance and solidarity, inspiring viewers to reflect on the struggles and triumphs of women fighting for their rights and freedom. Through a careful examination of these artworks, viewers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement and the role of art in amplifying its message. Each

piece offers a unique perspective, inviting viewers to contemplate the issues at hand and consider their own role in advancing the cause of women’s rights and equality.



Fig. 1. “Super Strong Revolutionary Hair Spray (Series)” – Anonymous

Figure 1 portrays a striking visual commentary, featuring three spray cans labeled “Super Strong” alongside the words “Woman Life Freedom.” Set against a collage of what appears to be torn posters and

images, this artwork captures the essence of street art’s energy and the raw, public assertion of a message. The juxtaposition of a beauty product—the spray can—commonly associated with aesthetics and conformity, with a powerful political message, creates an ironic yet potent symbol of resistance and the reclamation of personal and public space. The spray cans suggest action, the ability to leave a mark on the world, a tool for making one’s voice heard—a fitting metaphor for the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement’s use of art and digital media to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. The background collage, evocative of a cityscape’s layered textures, speaks to the complexity of the public discourse and the multifaceted nature of protest. This piece, therefore, not only contributes to the visual language of the movement but also encapsulates the transformative power of art in the struggle for rights and recognition.

Figure 2 depicts a person wearing a hijab and a gas mask, holding a book with a flower on the cover. This powerful image can be seen as a symbol of the resilience and determination to seek knowledge and beauty even amidst turmoil and oppression. The gas mask might represent protection from the toxic environment of censorship and the struggle for freedom of expression, while the book signifies the importance of education and culture. This artwork communicates a strong message about the pursuit of intellectual and cultural growth despite challenges, resonating with themes of resistance and the quest for change.

This image can be interpreted as a metaphor for the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement’s defiance against oppressive forces. The mask could represent the silencing of voices and the need for self-protection in the face of state violence, while the book suggests a commitment to education, growth, and the nurturing of a movement grounded in knowledge and cultural depth. The artwork speaks to the resilience of the young women and schoolgirls in the movement, who arm themselves with both literal and figurative protection while holding onto symbols of beauty, knowledge, and future growth. It is a visual representation of the movement’s fight for freedom, the pursuit of knowledge, and the right to exist without suffocation by oppressive forces.



Figure 3 presents three women of different ethnicities or backgrounds standing close together, with the central figure placing a hand with a henna design over the mouth of the woman in green. This powerful visual could represent solidarity across diverse communities within the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. The henna, often associated with celebrations and positive ceremonies in many cultures, here is marked on a hand poised in a silencing gesture, perhaps signifying the suppression of women’s voices and the cultural restraints placed upon them. The collective stance of the women, with their shoulders touching, could symbolize unity and shared strength in the face of such silencing. This artwork reflects the role of young women and schoolgirls who have played a pivotal role in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, often being at the forefront of protests and resistance. Their participation has brought a renewed vigor and perspective to the movement, challenging not only the specific issue of the hijab mandate but also the broader issues of freedom of expression and women’s rights in Iran.

(Left) Fig. 2. “School Girl” – Anonymous

(Right) Fig. 2. “All Together” – Anonymous



شماره یک از بینهایت
WOMEN

in the Middle of the Fire



**"A call to action
for the rights
and freedoms of
women, not only
in Iran but across
the world."**

Figure 4 depicts a stark and powerful graphic of a woman with her hair flowing freely, her arm raised high against a bold red backdrop. The style is reminiscent of protest art, with clear, strong lines and contrasting colors that convey a sense of urgency and defiance. The text "زن" meaning "Woman" and the hashtag "#زن_زندگی_آزادی" which translates to "#Woman_Life_Freedom," anchors the image in the context of the movement. The raised arm and unfettered hair can be seen as symbols of liberation and resistance, a clear reference to the actions of Iranian women who have bravely removed their hijabs in public as a form of protest. The red circle may symbolize the rising sun of a new day, hope, or the universal sign of alert, demanding immediate attention to the cause. This image captures the essence of the movement, which is a call to action for the rights and freedoms of women, not only in Iran but across the world.

۱۴۰۱
مهر ماه
2022
september



Fig 5. "Freedom Phoenix," by *Anonymous* (above) could be used as a visual representation or metaphor in the context of *Shahnameh* and the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Just as the phoenix symbolizes rebirth and renewal, *Shahnameh* and the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement may represent a new beginning or resurgence of feminist activism and empowerment. The vibrant colors and dynamic composition of the artwork could evoke a sense of hope, resilience, and the idea of rising from the ashes of oppression or adversity. This connection could help illustrate the themes of strength, perseverance, and the quest for freedom that are central to both the *Shahnameh* and the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

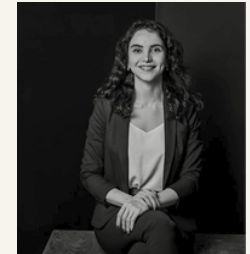
Conclusion and Further Discussion

The "Year of Hope" exhibition stands as a pivotal example of feminist digital placemaking, showcasing the potential of digital platforms to amplify marginalized voices and catalyze social change. However, a critical examination reveals both the strengths and limitations of this approach. One of the exhibition's key strengths lies in its ability to create a global network of solidarity and support, transcending geographical boundaries to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds in the shared cause of gender equality. By harnessing the power of art and digital media, the exhibition has effectively raised awareness about the challenges faced by women in Iran and has mobilized a global audience to advocate for change. Additionally, the exhibition's emphasis on artistic expression as a form of resistance and empowerment has contributed to a rich and nuanced narrative surrounding the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

Using visual metaphors and symbolic imagery, the artworks in the exhibition have succeeded in conveying the complex realities of women's experiences in Iran, shedding light on issues such as censorship, gender-based violence, and the struggle for autonomy.

However, despite its successes, the exhibition also faces several limitations. One such limitation is the inherent digital divide that exists within global communities. While the exhibition has been successful in reaching a wide audience, particularly through social media platforms, it is important to acknowledge that not all individuals have equal access to digital technologies. This raises questions about the inclusivity and accessibility of digital activism, particularly in regions where internet access is limited or restricted. Furthermore, the exhibition's reliance on digital platforms also exposes it to risks such as censorship and surveillance. As governments and authorities increasingly monitor online activities, activists and artists involved in the exhibition may face threats to their safety and security. This highlights the need for robust digital security measures to protect individuals engaged in online activism. The "Year of Hope" exhibition represents a significant achievement in the realm of feminist digital placemaking, it also underscores the complexities and challenges inherent in using digital platforms for activism. As digital technologies continue to evolve, it is essential for activists and advocates to critically examine the impact of their digital efforts, ensuring that they remain inclusive, accessible, and safe for all participants.

"By harnessing the power of art and digital media, the exhibition has effectively raised awareness about the challenges faced by women in Iran and has mobilized a global audience to advocate for change."



Asst. Prof. Dr. Asma Mehan, Ph.D.

Author, researcher, educator, and architect

Asst. Prof. Dr. Asma Mehan, Ph.D. is a researcher, educator, and architect working at the intersection of architectural humanities and critical urban studies. She is currently an assistant professor at Texas Tech University College of Architecture. She is the author of the books *Tehran: From Sacred to Radical* (Routledge, 2022) and *Kuala Lumpur: Community, Infrastructure, and Urban Inclusivity* (Routledge, 2020). She has authored over 50 articles and essays in scholarly books and professional journals in multiple languages, such as English, Persian, and Italian, on critical urban studies, architecture, urban planning, housing, and heritage studies.