

is based. Hence, her examination in this segment is much more advanced than those found in Parts I and II, suggesting that these first sections were simply tacked on to her dissertation in order to create a text that could be sold as a complete investigation of modern Arab art.

Shabout concludes by asserting that to understand modern Arab art “a number of issues [still] need to be explored through critical analysis” and poses the following questions: “How did modern Arab artists transform an aesthetic that for centuries remained tied to an Islamic ideal into a secular one? How did they transmute it into contemporary signs that became components of a modern vocabulary of the plastic arts?” Yet, these same questions were presented at the beginning of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* as premises that would be addressed through in-depth analysis and art historical documentation.

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Malu Halasa and Maziar Bahari's *Transit Tehran* on contemporary photographs of Iran

Reviewed by Janet Rady

Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations is the result of a collaboration between the London-based, US-born editor and journalist, Malu Halasa, and the Iranian journalist and film-maker, Maziar Bahari. Both have extensive previous experience in journalism and publishing as the high quality of this publication evidences.

This is a book about the people and the place that make up Tehran today, the totality which give it its undeniably obsessive and captivating identity. It's a wysiwyg view of the sprawling metropolis, in which over 14 million inhabitants reside. But it is much more than that. It's an elemental insight into the hearts and minds of young Iranians. With 75% of the population under 35, the majority of whom are too young to remember the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and many even the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, it is about where they come from, what motivates them and where they aspire to go.

Culturally, politically, and religiously diverse, each of the contributors, by means of thirty one essays, short stories, interviews, cartoons, photographs and photo essays, film stills capture a visceral, hauntingly honest and often contradictory, portrait of the city and its environs.

The contributors are primarily photo-journalists, reporters, anthropologists, artists and musicians - both Iranian and non-Iranian, those currently living in Iran and those outside, either by choice or by force of circumstance. Each have, in their own way, experienced the tragic results of the years of political turmoil and uncertainty in Iran. Yet each of those still with us continues, with fortitude and resilience and often with great humour, to document and challenge, not without risk, the society which binds them inextricably together.

Grounded by the inclusion of a map, timeline and a directory of key historical figures, *Transit Tehran* makes a useful reference tool, if nothing else, to those seeking top up any lacuna in their knowledge of the Country, with a quick factual fix. Essential also to the undoubted success of the book is the masterful translation of many of the contributors' texts from Farsi into English by Nilou Mobasser - not only are these a feat of incredible accuracy in translation, but they also provide for compelling reading as works of English prose in their own right.

The scene is set by the veteran, now exiled, journalist Massoud Behnoud who situates the city of Tehran in its historical and geographic locus, and like all good stories, this one highlights the intriguing tale of buried treasure troves, treasure-deeds and smuggling of spoils. Yet on a more cautionary note, it warns of the catastrophic effect that a, regularly predicted, impending earthquake would have on Tehran's recent and continuing explosive expansion of high rise edifices.

Moving on through the book, there appears to be no specific order in which each of the topics is treated, with the Editors letting the contributors speak for themselves. However, one is immediately struck by the extent to which women dominate the publication both metaphorically behind and in front of the lens, witnessing the seminal role they play in the life of the City. Sixty five percent of college students in Iran are female. Women work as lawyers, doctors, engineers, and as of 1998, they have been elevated to the ranks policewomen in the Law Enforcement Force Academy, a fact which the photojournalist Abbas Kowsari so eloquently portrays in his deliciously quixotic and paradoxical photograph of Graduates abseiling, chador-clad, down the facade of the Academy as part of their 'Passing Out Parade'.

Chadors also feature heavily in the squeaky clean environment of a female seminary, which is tackled by Roya Karimi, and additionally and perhaps somewhat incongruously by Javad Montazeri in his photo essay on women's enforced attire whilst bathing in his beloved Caspian Sea.

Concerns about the equality and lack of freedom of young women are focused upon by the journalist Asieh Amini who follows the fortunes of female 'wannabe' football supporters who go under the rubric 'White Scarves'. An altogether different view, however, is espoused by Soheila Beski who is under no illusion as to who is the dominant force in her portrait of feisty females holding forth in the Sepah Shopping Centre.

Award winning photographer Newsha Tavakolian provides a touching exposé of Maria, one of the many transsexuals surprisingly tolerated by the State, who started out in life as a married truck driver with three children. And equally poignant is the portrayal by the late Kaveh Golestan of Tehran's pre-Revolutionary, now destroyed, Red Light district of Shahre No, which starkly demonstrates the realities of the plight of prostitutes under the Shah's regime.

As in Kaveh Golestan's piece, the seamier side of Tehran life today is courageously exposed by Zohreh Khosh-

namak in her essay entitled *Skewer Hill: On the edge of the city which unravels the events which took place one night in February 2001 in the shadowy world of the Ghorbatis or exiles who once inhabited an area in the northeast margins of the city.* Like many tales of sex and the city, however, this one does not have a happy ending.

A more positive view, if not equally disturbing one, is revealed in Janne Bjerre Christensen's *Tehran Methadonai* in which she follows the activities of a reformed heroin addict Davud and his work, as part of a NGO programme, to help a small handful of Tehran's estimated two million drug users by offering them access to clean needles and the opportunity to kick their habit by switching to Methadone. Not without its difficulties, Davud often finds himself caught between the politics of state healthcare and the criminal offence of drug dealing, punishable by death.

Never far from the surface however, lurks the reality that this is a complex, overwhelmingly patriarchal society, the dynamics of which are evidenced by uncompromising icons of Iranian masculinity. Historical associations with religious martyrdom and sacrifice stemming from time of Imam Hussein, Shahnameh heroes, the ramifications of the Revolution and the War with Iraq are all witnessed in the powerful imagery of Iranian art and literature as captured by the contributors. One of these, the internationally acclaimed artist and war veteran, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, interviewed by wife Eugenie Dolberg, provides potently arresting paintings of 'strongmen' demonstrating their strength in traditional zoorkhaneh; of popular singers and film directors flaunting their egos in symbolic, imaginary settings.

In similar mode, another artist well known to the international art scene, Sadegh Tirafkan, exposes his bare torso in his *Whispers of the East* series in which he recalls Iran's cultural inheritance. And to reinforce this association, he juxtaposes in the same series, photos of American soldiers in Iraq with images of traditional Persian decorative arts and carpets.

Kaveh Golestan's son Mehrak Golestani, meanwhile, gives a different perspective of life for a young Iranian. As Iran's foremost rapper and hip-hop artist outside of the country, he documents the trials and tribulations of an underground culture, only marginally tolerated by the authorities, and consequently prevalent mostly in the relatively safe confines of Tehran's living rooms. In this ephemeral world, he recounts how recording artists come and go, always trying to stay one step ahead of the game, tracking each other

only through the medium of the internet and SMS text messages.

An equally clandestine event but this time, back on the track of the murky mixture of politics and Islamic religion is masterfully tackled by photo essayist Majid Saeedi in his chilling photos of one of the six monthly meetings at Tehran's Behesht Zahra Cemetery of the scarily named 'Coalition for Martyr-Inspired Actions against the Enemy and Their Interests'. The protagonists, all heavily shrouded in Palestinian kafiyyeh, demonstrate their desire to achieve martyrdom not in any conventional military engagement, as did those who participated in the Iran-Iraq war, or via adhesion to any particularly Shi'a believe but rather as individual suicide bombers fighting a guerrilla cause.

Mixed in with these ultra-realist portrayals of life in Iran, however, are the equally valid allusions to another more poetic and nostalgic world inhabited by paradise gardens, dreams of chocolate and of women, flower shops, and even the ever-loved emblematic, now discontinued, Peykan car. The stories do not end here and there is much, much more to be gained by reading the book.

To sum up, however, the message conveyed by Transit Tehran is that despite the bewilderingly schizophrenic nature of the city, its young inhabitants are a deeply proud people who enjoy the aspirations espoused by the majority of youth throughout the world today.

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Illustrations from Book



KAVEH GOLESTAN Health Certificates, 1975-78
 Photograph, dimensions variable, 1975-78



KHOSROW HASSANZADEH
 Chai Shahrzad, 2006
 Acrylic on canvas, 1 x 1.6 m