Elke Bippus, Anne Ganzert,
Isabell Otto (eds.)

taking sides

Theories, Practices, and Cultures
of Participation in Dissent

Contents

3. Queer Thinking

4. Theories of Critique

Corpoanarchy: A Molecular Act of Refusal

Kamran Behrouz

This chapter is based on an artistic research, attempting to connect interrelated parts of two multimedia installations[1] together in order to unfold the notion of 'corpoanarchy' as a form of protest. The artworks were based on research about the effects of biopolitics on normalization and containment of the corporeality of trans/queer/non-binary bodies. In several cases within authoritarian states (e.g., Iran), such effects resulted in the disposition of bodies in diaspora, camps, and exile, which introduced these bodies to new rigid forms of borders and necropolitics. This process reveals the failure of the universality of human rights. Under neoliberal capitalism, pharmaceutical industries commodified health and the representation of bodies and sexuality – what Michel Foucault analyzes as "the constitution of the market as site of the formation of truth" (Foucault 1990-98). Preciado calls it the "pharmacopornographic" era (2013: 23), where identities and even pleasure are co-dependent on the dosage of our intakes provided by the market (e.g., performance enhancers, antidepressants, or hormones). 'Corpoanarchy' suggests a critical way of dealing with this matrix through a performative refusal on a molecular level.

The main visual reference in both installations (see fig. 1 & fig. 2) is a hand painted and digital printed piece of transparent textile, similar to skin, resembling a glossary page defining the meaning of the phrase 'corpoanarchy', alongside a painting based on a famous historical photo, taken on June 13th 1936. The image presumably shows August Landmesser (Eckler 1996), a German citizen who refused to perform the Nazi salute at the launch of the naval training vessel *Horst Wessel*. This project utilizes the historical photo as a microscopic metaphor to visualize the corporeality of 'corpoanarchy'. (see fig. 3.)

---

1 The first multimedia installation was exhibited in Raumstation, Zurich, December 2018. The exhibition titled, *Corpoanarchy: A (trans)lational tale*, is my attempt to reflect on the politics of language and Biopolitics. The second iteration of this multimedia installation titled, *Corpoanarchy: the politics of radical refusal*, was exhibited in Helmhaus, Zurich, September 2019. My aim in this work is to identify and unfold the different forms of corpoanarchy as they appear in contemporary history. There are several interrelated fragments connecting these two installations, which this chapter attempts to analyze in depth.

Figure 1: Corpoanarchy: A (Trans)lational Tale, Raumstation, Zurich, 2018, detail.
Figure 2: Corpoanarchy: The Politics of Radical Refusal, Helmhaus, Zurich, 2019, detail.

Figure 3: Left: original image of August Landmesser 1963, photographer unknown. Right: manipulated and hand-painted version of the image, 2018, Kamran Behrouz.

It attempts to raise a series of questions: What do we call such acts of re-fusal? Could it be resistance? Persistence? Civil courage? Or resilience? Or do we need another word to express a complexity as such?

Somatic Translation and Untranslatability

The term *corpoanarchy* is a neologism; it wants to claim existence as a new word, whilst also revealing the process of translation and 'untranslatability.' The word itself follows the semiological structure of the phrase corporeal or *corporeus* in Latin, which means "from the body" (from *corpus* "body"). Here, 'real' has been replaced with 'anarchy', and the combination is defined as: "the performative refusal of the body on a molecular level".

What is crucial in this research is the untranslatability of the word 'anarchy' in Farsi. The etymology of the word 'anarchy' goes back to its Greek roots: Anarkhia – "lack of a leader, the state of people without a government" (from *an-* "without", and *arkhos* "leader"). However, the translation of the word anarchy in Farsi is "chaos". It is a fascinating gap which might accidentally reveal a crucial piece of Persia and the Persian language's history, that is an indisputably monarchical history. From the Madian (650-330 BC) to the Sassanid empire (224-651 AD), to the Qajar (1789-1925) or Pahlavi dynasties (1925-1979) and even contemporary history, the figure of king or 'supreme leader' has never been, even temporarily, eliminated from the social imaginary. Even the history of Persian literature is filled with figures of rebels and heroes who lead the nation towards freedom or peace. Could this explain the untranslatability of the word anarchy in Farsi? How does history reveal itself in language? And how do languages forge psycho-political structures?

Languages shape and create not only subjectivity, but subjectivation. Accordingly, when subjects lack specific signifiers to register or to express their experiences (for any cultural and/or historical reason), the notions and subjects have been bent and compromised themselves in other familiar signifiers, which at some point perpetuate the lack and normalize the absence.

This issue is similar to the lack of a sufficiently precise word to address transgender people in Farsi. Likewise, the crucial distinctions expressed by the words *sex*, *gender*, and *sexuality* are conflated in Farsi into one single term: *jensiat*. The term *jensiat* is thus very similar to the Latin word *genus*.

Moreover, *sex* and *gender* as keywords in trans-Atlantic feminist theory, have always been at the center of untranslatability in queer-feminist discourses within different languages. "Take the English term 'genre,', which like Greek *genos*, French *genre*, or German *Geschlecht* is an Untranslatable prime" (Apter 2013: 145). Genre interfered with the translation of "gender" in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990-99) when the book began to appear in different languages. As Butler mentioned himself:

> "Like 'genus' in Swedish which implies species-being, so Geschlecht in German implied not only a natural kind, but a mode of natural ordering that served the purposes of the reproduction of the species. That early German translators of Gender

> Trouble chose to translate 'gender' as 'Geschlechtsidentität' (sexual identity) may have been an effort to move away from species discourse, or perhaps it was a way of responding to those emerging queer arguments that claimed that binary sex was understood to serve the purposes of reproducing compulsory heterosexuality (Rubin, Butler). The problem with that choice, however, was that it confused gender with sexual orientation or disposition. And part of the analytic work of understanding gender apart from biological causality and functionalism was precisely to hold open the possibility that gender appearance may not correspond to sexual disposition or orientation in predictable ways." (Butler 2014: 1040)

As Brad Epps has noted, "Gender Trouble, in a global frame, needs to be at once supplemented (in the deconstructive sense) and recast as 'translation trouble' or, better yet, 'language trouble'." (Najmabadi 2014: 8) Drawing on these arguments, my research is an attempt to challenge the existing methodologies, to re-translate these terms, or to even come up with new terms as a solution for avoiding 'cultural discombobulation'[2]. In other word: "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) of untranslatability during the act of translation.

Figure 4: Etymology and Translation of the word Corpoanarchy in English and Persian.

---
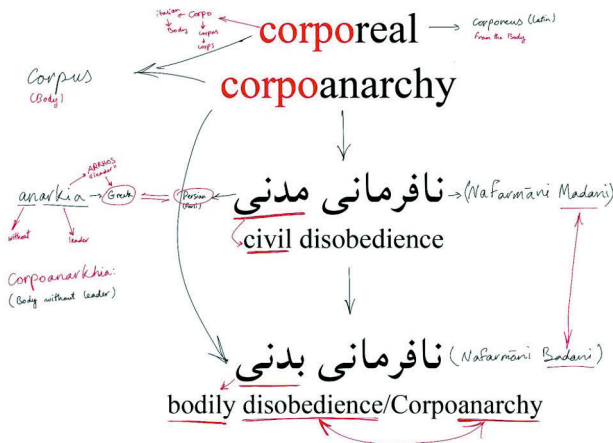
2   Persian readers may find it helpful to reference: Ashouri, Daryoosh, Rethinking Persian Language, Nashr-e Markaz, Tehran, 1993

In the present research, 'corpoanarchy' is translated into Farsi as *nafarmani badani*. This phrase is very similar to *nafarmani madani*, which means civil disobedience. However, the word 'civil' (*madani*) is replaced by the word 'bodily' (*badani*). At first sight this may seem to be merely a cosmopolitical word play between *madan* ('cities') and *badan* ('body'), but in fact it also fits the meaning of the concept of corpoanarchy as it has unfolded in archives of trans, non-binary, and queer bodies in diaspora, exile, or refugee camps. *Nafarmani badani* translates back to English as "bodily disobedience" which might be the closest equivalent in Farsi to the concept of *corpo+anarchy* (*body without leader*) as a form of civil disobedience on a molecular level of concrete, embodied practice(s). (See fig. 4.)

Semiotics (Translation) and Somatics (Performance)

The other fragment in this constellation was an installation called *A room of her own*, which was a tribute to the unspeakable death of queer and trans people who silently disappear from the collective memory of queer culture. When I first read about the case of Mahtab[3] – an Iranian transgender asylum seeker (cf. Shakhsari 2013: 565), who found themselves stuck in the Kafkaesque political dispositive of borders, it immediately reminded me of Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (Woolf 1929). In Mahtab's case, it seems that their daily existence and comfort had been so profoundly unsettled that death itself came to hold a promise of comfort: death as the only room of one's own; death as a performative refusal. (See fig. 5)

The installation depicts Mahtab's room shortly after they took their life silently in their apartment, with a storyteller stating an androgynous manifesto projected on top of their deathbed.[4]

Archive

In 2016, while I was doing research at the archives of Iran's Human Rights Documentation Center[5], looking for cases and testimonies of trans and queer refugees, as well as the rates of suicide amongst these groups, I accidentally came across

---

3   "[Mahtab] was waiting for several years to be recognized as a legitimate refugee by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the Canadian embassy. In 2008, not too long after arriving in Canada, [Mahtab] quietly took her life in her apartment, which she was asked to vacate as the terms of her subsidized housing had come to an end." (Shaksari 2014: 565)

4   Cf. http://www.kamranbehrouz.com/corpoanarchy/a-room-for-her-own/, last access, 01.01.2020.

5   Cf.: https://iranhrdc.org/, last access 1.07.2020.

Figure 5: Corpoanarchy: The Politics of Radical Refusal,
Helmhaus, Zurich, 2019, detail.

Mahtab's case[6], which led me directly to Sima Shakhsari's work and their crucial essay *Killing me softly with your rights* (2014). The story of Mahtab outlines an unspeakable death, which Shakhsari analyzes in depth, and sadly, this story is not

---

6   Sima Shakhsari (2013: 565) referred to Mahtab in: 'The transgender studies reader Vol.2 edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle' as "Naz" in order to protect their privacy.

the only one: there are several similar cases regarding the necropolitics of queer displaced bodies.[7]

Iran has a peculiar and paradoxical history of gender and sexuality:

> "Some of the conceptual distinctions among gender, sex, and sexuality within the Anglo-American context, including the distinction sometimes made between transgender and transsexual (based on surgical modifications to the body), have been shaped over the past decades by the identity politics of gender and sexuality as well as queer activism and queer critical theory. Transsexuality in Iran has not been shaped by such developments." (Najmabadi 2014: 8)

Contemporary narratives affirm that transgender people are legally accepted as "correction cases", and in fact they must go through long and absurd interviews and examinations called 'diagnostic test',[8] in order to be separated from homosexuals. (In contrast to 'correction cases,' homosexuals are considered deviants, and as a group find themselves systematically and relentlessly discriminated against).

Sometimes these interviews consist of utterly absurd and gender-normative questions such as: "Do you squeeze your toothpaste tube in the middle or from the bottom up?"[9] (Najmabadi 2014: 30) And some of these random questions determine one's gender identity as well as the fate of an individual's body. Some of these random questions determine which hormones belong to which bodies and which bodies will be illegalized or degraded.

Surprisingly, in such a conservative country, after this process, transgender people are legally accepted and have the right to go through transition, hormone therapy, and surgery and even get a new identification card or passport. However, transition in Iran is not a matter of liberating choice but rather a 'normalization

---

7   Cf.:   https://iranhrdc.org/in-memory-of-marjan-ahouraee-an-iranian-transsexual-refugee/, last access 01.01.2020.

8   According to the Iranian Public Conscription Organization of NAJA's last updated list of various grounds that can exempt men [assigned male at birth] from obligatory Military service (02.01.2021), Transsexuality (written only in Latin as TS without any translation in Farsi) is mentioned under "Chapter 5: Psychiatric Diseases, Section 12: Gender Identity disorder (TS) that is certified by Legal Medicine organization and confirmed by the Armed Service's medical centers (ASMC) is ground for permanent exemption".
     Even though according to Iran's Islamic penal code, "Article 234, homosexuality (in case of male-male penile-anal intercourse) is punishable by death", paradoxically, in the same Chapter 5: Psychiatric Diseases, Article 7 states: "Perversions that violate the social and military code of conduct (such as sexual perversion and homosexuality) warrant a 6 month deferment. After 6 months deferment, and upon confirmation by the ASMC, the applicant is eligible for a permanent exemption." Cf. http://vazifeh.police.ir , last access 02.01.2021 (The website is only accessible in Iran or via VPN)

9   "The presumption is that females are neat and press from the bottom up; males just squeeze the toothpaste tube randomly, usually from the middle." (Najmabadi 2014: 26).

proces's: an obligatory rule for transgender people to turn into 'corrected bodies'. So, what we have as an archive of transgender people in Iran is limited to those who accepted and completed this process. What has never been documented or has simply been erased from the archive are the histories of those bodies who refused to be normalized in this way or who never came out as a transgender person.

If this is biopolitics, how should we map it? A condition that forces transgender people to either transition or leave their home country – and thus deal with other forms of necropolitics, biopolitics, or border policies, highly charged by new right-wing policies such as the U.S. Muslim-ban? A condition designed to make you depressed while you remain suspended indefinitely within the necropolitical borders.

By contrast, 'corpoanarchy' suggests a molecular resistance in such cases, by rejecting the forces of substances as a molecular disobedience. Along with compulsory hormones, substances such as strong antidepressants, which come with the explicit warning: "suicidal thoughts might be the side effect of this medication" have been often (ab)used as a technique of normalization. The problem is not necessarily the negative impact of substances (e.g. antidepressants) but the pressure applied. In other words, instead of seeking another solution or addressing the root of the illness, substances are forcefully prescribed to make people functional as quickly as possible.

Phenomenology of the Red Virus

As I previously argued, 'corpoanarchy' suggests a critical way of dealing with a matrix of thoughts, a performative refusal on a molecular level. The model is based on the performance of an 'antibody' in confrontation with a virus. Here, *red virus* is a metaphor for the 'politics of fear' perpetuated by right-wing populist politicians of today (see fig.7/6).

In the final section of this chapter, I examine the performativity of social movements through the lens of the behavior of such micro-organisms. The phrase (corpoanarchy/نافرمانی بدنی) itself might be understood as a proposition for a systematic form of "micropolitics" (Paar 2005: 164).

The third fragment of my research is an animation showcased in both multimedia installations. (See fig. 6/7) In the first installation, the video is placed next to the painting of Chelsea Manning, carrying the message of "I would prefer not to" (Melville 2009) on her hat,[10] as an attempt to sum up the notion of refusal as taking a side. In the second installation, exhibited in Helmhaus, Zurich (2019), an

---

10   Cf. http://www.kamranbehrouz.com/corpoanarchy/phenomenology-of-the-red-virus/, last access 8.4.2021.

Figure 6: Video still of the animation 'Phenomenology of the Red Virus', Kamran Behrouz, 2018.

animation is projected on sheer fabric next to the death bed of Mahtab. This work analyzes the performance of the red virus and creates a bridge between the workings of populist movements and the notion of the "banality of evil" introduced by Hannah Arendt (1978: 148).

> The animation shows a red cap with the words "banality of evil" written on it, resembling the MAGA (short for 'Make America Great Again') hat, used in Donald Trump's election rallies. The hat endlessly spins around, and an otherworldly voice narrates the following story:"Then suddenly a red virus emerged, nobody knew who was the patient zero exactly, but it outbursts quickly. Some of them were panicked, most of them were infected. It was really a mess my dear, you can't believe that. You know, it always needs a host: a body, a brain, a political narrative, circulating on social media and news and a brain and the news and the brain, and the news… like a Red Virus, but on the other hand there was this meme saying: 'you can't spell the hatred without red hat'… I found it genius.

Figure 7: Painting, Acrylic and ink on paper, Kamran Behrouz, 2018.

> But the virus, you know, is not something new, you know that, we thought we've been vaccinated, we never did, we never really been cured. Now once again a shiny new red virus, dismembering our memory. A very simple and banal monster. Arendt calls it the 'banality of evil': something like the inability to think, to giving in your thoughts to those mad men. Haraway calls it 'thoughtlessness', I kind of like it… My grandma on the other hand used to say 'evil will repeat itself without compassion, will repeat itself ruthlessly and thoughtlessly till it destroys itself'… (sigh) you know evil can't reflect and that's the T. So, I step back to rethink everything again: am I a virus? Or am I an antibody?"[11]

It fades to the painting (see fig. 7) while the *Song for the Unification of Europe* by Zbigniew Preisner plays in the background (Behrouz 2019).[12]

The story ends with an open-ended question and harks back to the notion of reflection and thoughtlessness, which is perfectly outlined by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*: "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good." (1978: 148)

---

11   Ibid.

12   Cf.   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH_8C_p1VsE&feature=emb_title,   last   access 01.01.2020.

This brings me back to the first line of this paper. Can we consider the notion of refusal, or better, of 'micropolitics of remaining still', as a form of political protest? Or in other words, how is it possible to utilize the corporeal act of refusal as a form of occupying space or even a radical form of protest? (See fig. 8)[13]

Figure 8: Contemporary examples of corpoanarchy: Kamran Behrouz, Helmhaus, Zurich, 2019, detail of the installation politics of Radical refusal.

---

13   Three paintings part of the installation *the politics of radical refusal*. Right: August Landmesser (May 24, 1910–October 17, 1944). Left: Thích Quảng Đức (1897–June 11, 1963), who was a Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk who burned himself to death at a busy Saigon road intersection on 11 June 1963, to protest Vietnamese government led by Ngô Đình Diệm. In the middle: Sahar Khodayari: (c. 1990 – September 8, 2019) also known as the Blue Girl, was an Iranian woman who disguised herself as a man to get into the stadium in order to watch her favorite blue team. After she was arrested, she set herself on fire in protest of her prison sentence, in front of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran. She remained unsupported by her family which reflects on the 'culture of shame': When one's genitals determines one's fate.

References

Apter, Emily (2013): *Against world literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability*, London: Verso.

Arendt, Hannah (1963): *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press.

Arendt, Hannah (1977): *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt.

Butler, Judith (2014): "Gender", in: Apter, Emily/Lezra, Jacques/Wood, Micheal (eds.): *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Butler, Judith (2008): *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

Behrouz, Kamran (2019): *Corpoanarchy. The Politics of Radical Refusal*, http://www.kamranbehrouz.com/sample-page/installations/corpoanarchy-the-politics-of-radical-refusal2019/, last access 01.01.2020.

Behrouz, Kamran: *Corpoanarchy. A (Trans)lational Tale*, http://www.kamranbehrouz.com/corpoanarchy/concept/, last access 01.01.2020.

Eckler, Irene (1996): *Die Vormundschaftsakte 1935-1958. Verfolgung einer Familie wegen "Rassenschande"*, Hamburg/Schwetzingen: Horneburg Verlag.

Epps, Brad (2002): *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and same sex desire in contemporary Iran*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Foucault, Michel (1998-1990): *History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, New York: Vintage Books.

Haraway, Donna (2016): *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Melville, Herman (2009): *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, New York: HarperCollins.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh (2014): *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Preciado, Paul. B (2013): *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Shakhsari, Sima (2014): "Killing me Softly with your Rights", in: Haritaworn, Jin/Kunstman, Adi/Posocco, Silvia (eds.): *Queer Necropolitics*, New York: Routledge.

Shakhsari, Sima (2014): "Iranian Transsexual Refugees and the Politics of Rightful Killing", in: Stryker, Susan/Whittle, Stephan (eds.): *The Transgender Studies Reader*, vol. 2, New York: Routledge.

Surin, Kenneth (2005): "Micropolitics", in: Parr, Adrian (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Stryker, Susan/Whittle, Stephen (eds.) (2006-2013): *The Transgender Studies Reader*, vol. 2, New York: Routledge.

Woolf, Virginia (2013): *A Room of One's Own*, London: London Collector's Library.