

Encroachment on the Everyday Tehran's Self-portrait

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Tehran's Self-Portrait (2008–10) is a photo series by Mehraneh Atashi comprised of Atashi's self-portraits as an urban pedestrian within Tehran's cityscapes and monuments. The series drew a fair amount of attention to Atashi's work, mainly because it led to her imprisonment in 2009 following Iran's presidential election.

In this article, I take *Tehran's Self-Portrait* as a performative project, and examine the photos in order to trace Atashi's performative acts in the city. By performative, I particularly mean the act of walking in Tehran, which in this project accompanies documentation and recording in situ, and which I relate to the practice of *flânerie* – a notion of nineteenth century European origin, which denotes the romantic figure of an urban explorer, who engages in the practice of wandering the city while observing it.[1] The *flâneur* was characterized as a 'disinterested voyeur' and 'hero of the modern city, enjoying the freedom to '... get lost in the crowds but, importantly, "to observe and be observed".'[2] In this essay, I draw a few parallels that situate Atashi's work in conversation with already prominent pieces on contemporary instances of *flânerie* by artists such as the Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alÿs. I do so not to displace the trajectory of performativity within the urban space. Rather, I do so in order to discuss this work in relation to other performative works and theories that enables a discussion of aspects within Atashi's work that otherwise would not be taken into account.

Admittedly, the *flâneur* emerged as a result of urban developments in Paris in the nineteenth century, and one needs to bear in mind the socio-historical origins of this figure. The notion of *flânerie* has been theorized and explored in practice by many artists, from the Surrealists in the 1920s to the Situationists in the 1960s.[3] The notion furnishes a way to perceive walking among other everyday acts, and to subject it to richer criticism and significance in urban space. Urban space is the locus of embodiment and distribution of power, and the habitual tactics by which ordinary citizens interact with the space can enunciate their subjectivity, agency, and individuality. In this vein, some performative art practices use aspects of *flânerie* to examine the impact of regional conflict in urban space. For example, Alÿs work, *The Green Line (sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic)* (2004), consists of Alÿs walking in Jerusalem while dripping green paint from a tin as he walks. In this, Alÿs plays with the idea of drawing borderlines in the geo-political conflict in Palestine, but does so only by acting out on foot the very banal daily routine of people living in this area, for whom walking is the most affordable way to navigate the city.



Mehraneh Atashi, *Tehran's Self-portrait* (2008-10).
Courtesy of the artist.

The work not only satirizes the act of dripping paint in the history of art (as in the work of famous Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock's drip paintings) but also aesthetizes walking itself by tracing its imperfections with tenuous lines of paint. It also alludes to the contentious and messy act of drawing borders – as slim as a line – in this region. These critical significations are furnished through walking; one of the most basic daily acts.

Taking Alÿs signature piece as an example of works that explore the effects of walking in a non-western space that is socio-politically different in terms of constitution and context to the sites from which *flânerie* emerged in Europe. The work also explores the potential of walking as an aesthetic intervention in socio-political discourse, rather than an act of leisure for a burgeoning bourgeoisie. In the case of Atashi's spontaneous and ephemeral wandering in Tehran, *Tehran's Self-Portrait* relates to the trajectory of the *flâneur* in terms of performativity and transience. As context for understanding Atashi's project, it's important to note that the movement and comportment of Tehran's citizens are severely regulated. This regimentation of bodies is best described by Asef

Bayat, who observes: 'A mode of government that devotes so much attention to the corporeal disciplining of its citizens is bound to be susceptible to the undermining influence of their everyday actions and attitudes'.^[4] In this situation, everyday practices – regulated and choreographed by the state – lay bare the public sensibilities and surveillance of ordinary people in their daily routines, and reveal instances in which instantaneous resistance might come from the citizens.

Atashi has consistently grappled with the relationship of her body to space in her artworks. Previously her highly regarded photo series *Bodiless* or *zurkhaneh* – literally 'house of strength' – took her to the traditional and entirely masculine space of Iranian gymnasiums. For the photos that comprise *zurkhaneh*, Atashi inserted herself into the setting in a playful manner by taking photos of her reflection in the mirror, so that she appears smaller than other people and objects in the frame, and often positioned in the margins. This symbolizes the fact that, by convention, she was not supposed to be in this space. The photos testify to her foray into the traditional space, her presence, and her performance in response to a pedigree of masculinity, although only momentarily. Looking at the photos from the *zurkhaneh* series, one's understanding of a gendered division of space is put on trial, as we bear witness to Atashi grappling with the relation of the body to its environment. To capture these images required penetrating the space where gender division is stiflingly prevalent, after all. But at the same time, these photographs also act as an ethnographic record of a space on the brink of extinction: the traditional working-man's gym, due to the economic and cultural gentrification taking over large parts of Tehran.



Mehraneh Atashi, *Bodiless* or *zurkhaneh* (2004).
Courtesy of the artist.

In contrast to the *zurkhaneh* series, *Tehran's Self-Portrait* saw Atashi inscribing her body on the broader

cityscape to examine the relation she has with the city. As mentioned, walking is a mode of corporeal engagement with the city, and the walkability of Tehran's downtown core where Atashi conducted her *flânerie* perfectly facilitates her engagement. The project was initiated by a number of improvisational practices and record keepings. Atashi appropriates the *flâneur's* modality of circumnavigating the city, and thus the performative aspect is *a priori* to the photo series. Our access to the performance, however, is only through the moments encapsulated within photos and the photographer's own accounts. The hasty shots and low quality prints that make up *Tehran's Self-Portrait* is evidence of Atashi in performance, for instance, or the fact that, in a majority of photos, Atashi looks straight into the camera, her face often dovetailing with the landscape.

What is captured in *Tehran's Self-Portrait* can be partially identified as what Michel De Certeau discerns within streets as a manifestation of 'forests of gestures'. That is, 'movements [that] cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in a text'.^[5] Walking in urban space is a multimodal sensory experience that is impossible to be captured in photos; further to this, the very dynamics of the urban sites within which bodies navigate are often left invisible in the image itself. Therefore, the layered visuality enhances the sensory experience of the viewer, but does not capture the experience of walking in a given site. Admittedly, the photos can only represent fragments of Atashi's urban *flânerie* and bodily experience; an ephemeral imprint on the space through a momentary performance. Each photograph becomes simply one of the many traces of her performative presence in Tehran through which she inscribes herself in the cityscape and arrests her fleeting presence in a photo, what Atashi has described as 'a record of my presence as a document of the self and the event together at the same time'.^[6]

The significance of asserting a 'presence' in Tehran is due to the spontaneous and potential precarity regarding artistic creativity in this city. As De Certeau asserted, walking as an enactment of the actual city not only appropriates urban space, but also produces new spaces. De Certeau delineated the ways in which ordinary citizens interact with urban space by what he regards as tactics. Regarding the capacity and empowering dimension of tactics, he elaborates, 'The space of the tactic is the space of the other (...) it is a maneuver "within the enemy's field of vision.' It does not, therefore have the options of planning'.^[7] In light of this well-known definition, which considers spontaneous everyday practices of ordinary citizens as acts of resistance, *flânerie* can be regarded as an everyday tactic in urban terrain, too. In *Tehran's Self-Portrait*, for instance, following the 2009 election in Iran, participation in the demonstrations against the government could have legal consequences for the participants, including imprisonment. During those volatile days in particular, carrying a camera was an open act of defiance, since the government did not want the demonstrations discussed in foreign media and news outlets. This context conforms with what De Certeau regards as the resistance dimension of everyday activities, including walking and, by extension, *flânerie*.

Embodiment in the city has always been accompanied by engendering. To engender, according to Marsha Meskimmon, is:

(...) both to produce/create and to reproduce sexually. [...] it is the ideal signifier of making spaces meaningful through social structures in which gender difference is always and already present.^[8]

Another performative layer of Atashi's work concerns gender performance that I discussed above in passing, regarding the *zurkhaneh* series. One significant aspect of regulation of bodies in the context of the movement of people in Tehran and their circulation within public space is severe regimentation of gender performance, requiring men and women to embody a specific demeanor and compartment. Reflecting on the already

established gender codes concerning dress and the wearing of the hijab, Atashi's performativity enacts and engenders the city's particular coding of gender, as she abides by the principle of the hijab. She does this in a city where female corporeality, since the 1979 Revolution, has been problematic. (There are not many statues of women in the city beyond those that embody the conventional feminine role of the mother and nurturer.) The photographs of Atashi can thus be considered temporal monuments to a female body's intervention into a landscape. Atashi engenders the city by means of *flânerie* and by meandering at times into volatile situations. The occasion of mass demonstrations following the 2009 controversial election, the presence of women was quite noticeable in reportages of the demonstrations. Atashi – in the case of photos taken during the demonstrations – took part in the collective walking that led to the engendering of the green movement in part through the dynamic presence of women.



Mehraneh Atashi, *Tehran's Self-portrait* (2008-10).
Courtesy of the artist.

In order to comply with the social codes of the city, acts of resistance have to be registered instantaneously and in fleeting moments. Atashi adds another function to *flânerie* by her tendency to make a statue of herself in the city. She maintains that: 'I have tried to explore the idea of making a statue of myself in Tehran. What you are

seeing through the eyes of a photographer and as an urban sculpture.^[9]Atashi's note needs to be contextualized in respect to a series of curious events in Tehran in 2010. According to Asef Bayat:

In May 2010, Tehran residents realized with astonishment that several statues of artists, writers and historical figures such as Avicenna had mysteriously disappeared from the city's public parks and squares—blatant thefts clearly carried out with cranes and heavy machinery, pointing to official approval for this attempt to disfigure the secular body of the city.^[10]

Aside from the vexing disappearance of statues of intellectuals and historical figures, these occurrences point to the tension regarding the human embodiment in urban space in Tehran. In response to this tension, Atashi sculpts and solidifies her presence in the urban space with photography. The photograph is the material imprint of engendering the city that overcomes the circumscribed gender codes placed on women's bodies. The juxtaposition of Atashi's face with the cityscape is a symbolic way of self-identification with the urban space, which in turn recalls the conception of *flânerie* as the condition of knowing urban space through embodiment. As an artist who grew up in Tehran, Atashi has internalized the many implications of gendered space, particularly at the thresholds between the private and public domains. After all, her embodiment in the city and its representation is influenced by her lived experience; the resulting photos from her walks in fact arrested the experience of being in the city that is imbued with personal memories and motions. Atashi's meticulous position within this project embodies her knowledge of the city by re-living those memories in flesh.

In de Certeau's attempt to theorize everyday life through its practices that are done mostly intuitively, de Certeau sees walking as a 'spatial acting-out of the place', which conveys the relations among different movements and positions that make walking as act of enunciation.^[11] Physical characteristics of any spatial order provide a set of possibilities and boundaries onto walking. In fact, the act of walking is the negotiation and actualization of these interdictions and possibilities. Citizen bodies are vehicles to experience the mutual imbrications of spatial practice and symbolic power in the urban space – a locus of ceremonial performance, display, and concealment. As a trace of her act of walking, Atashi's photos show appropriation of the public space in Tehran, independent from representations of official discourses, particularly about the presence and code of conduct of women. In addition, Atashi asserted her physical presence with the aid of the simple and everyday tactic of walking, and playfully mobilized individualistic modes of presence in the city.

[1] I have in mind some other similar projects that grappled with the notion of *flânerie* such as Mehran Mohajer's photo series *The Memories of an Indolent, Fatigued, Flâneur* (2008) and later Arash Fayezi in *Ramblings of a Flâneur* (2008–11)

[2] V. Briginshaw, "'Keep Your Great City Paris": the Lament of the Empress and Other Women,' in *Dance in the City*, ed. Helen Thomas (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 41.

[3] See *The Situationist City* (1998) by Simon Sadler, and *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* (2002) by Tom McDonough.

[4] A. Bayat, 'Tehran: Paradox City,' *New Left Review*, 2010, p. 122.

[5] M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.101.

[6] Mehraneh Atashi, Personal Website <http://www.mehranehatashi.com/slideshow-portrait.html>.

[7] De Certeau, 36.

[8] M. Meskimmon, *Engendering the City: Women Artists and Urban Space*. London: Scarlet Press, 1997, p. 1.

[9] S. Steward, 'Sue Steward Introduces Photographer Mehraneh Atashi's 'Tehran Project'', YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb0VYDDbdPA>.

[10] A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013. p. 171.

[11] De Certeau, 98.

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