

Folio

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## THE FUTURE STATE

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<https://alserkalavenue.ae/en/folio/the-future-state.php>



German-Iranian artist Anahita Razmi's practice is experimental, relevant to both contemporary culture and history, and known for unearthing parallels and connections between cultures with a political twist. THE FUTURE STATE, created within this year's edition of the Goethe at LUX London residency, sees Razmi address the future of The Islamic Republic of Iran through different diasporic perspectives in an open roundtable format, which is accompanied by the exhibition The Future State, a preliminary (until 4 August) at LUX London.

The new on-going work reveals the process of the project, rather than just an outcome. Inviting political activists and artists through to writers and filmmakers, the roundtable series launched 31 May with a screening of Maziar Bahari's *An Iranian Odyssey* (2010). As it continues through to its fourth segment on 26 August, the project explores modes of constructing a discussion—including the upcoming THE FUTURE STATE #04's openness to public participation—under one very specific condition.

**Katrina Kufer: Your work often touches on Iran and its history, its connections with other nations, and contemporary culture. How did you decide on this project—is it fair that it is one of your most directly political?**

Anahita Razmi: There are many discussions recently whether art necessarily needs to take a politically active stance within current atrocious political circumstances. I feel if there is a space at all where contemporary art production can be relevant, it is by creating spaces for alternative positions, for outsider positions—positions that are not simply functioning within a system and within current dominating media structures. My references have, in this sense, always been political references, but yes, for this project they are very directly laid out on the table.

**KK: Tell me more about the project THE FUTURE STATE.**

AR: The project is titled THE FUTURE STATE and is conceived as series of roundtable settings, providing space for discussions about the future state of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is developed with reference to the work of Iranian Marxist Mansoor Hekmat, a theorist, revolutionary and leader of the Iranian worker-communist movement, active in Iran until 1981, and outside the country, in Kurdistan, and the UK until his death in 2002. I am inviting different contributors from very different backgrounds—political activists, journalists, writers, artists, filmmakers and cultural workers—to speculate on this topic. A topic which in itself of course is very loaded, especially at this moment in time, where the Islamic Republic of Iran is facing a surge in economic and environmental problems, ongoing domestic protests and newly imposed sanctions.

**KK: Your works often involve firsthand research—in what way was doing the research for this project different compared to your other projects?**

AR: My research approach for THE FUTURE STATE doesn't differ that much from previous projects, though in this case I decided to make the research itself public instead of just showing an outcome. The experimental roundtables for THE FUTURE STATE are trying to facilitate settings for research, discussion and speculation around the future of Iran. In this sense they are very open and I want to avoid thinking of them as a source material that I can directly use as an artist. At the same time, I just realized a new work in relation to this research, a video titled PARTIES that just premiered within the exhibition The Future State, a preliminary at LUX London.

**KK: Your residency with Goethe at LUX was conceived in relation to Karl Marx's 200th birthday this year. You led a cemetery tour on 7 July before the exhibition opening on 13 July—how did this stimulate the work?**

AR: Marx is buried very close to LUX in Highgate cemetery, and so are a few other known Marxists from various international backgrounds. Mansoor Hekmat's grave is on the patch next to Marx grave. I find it interesting to think about links through those spatial connections, and to take the lesser-known 'peripheries' of Marx grave on the cemetery as an impetus for the project. During the cemetery tour we bumped into a Canadian-Iranian couple, him bringing a photo of his Iranian uncle in the 80s at the same spot—with mustache, beret and baby stroller—posing in front of Marx's grave. They came to the cemetery to re-stage that photo. THE FUTURE STATE finds some of its initial topics in relation to the writings of Marx and Hekmat and, in a way, also to this re-staged photo: Can we imagine how the 'Islamic Republic of Iran' would look like today if a socialist instead of an Islamic revolution would have taken place? Is socialism a model we can refer to as a model for 'a future state'? Or what other models can we think of? In relation to the recent and ongoing protests in Iran? How can one work from a diaspora in relation to these questions?

**KK: How does incorporating roundtables play into the goals of the project, and more broadly, your practice? And to whom are these discussions talking?**

AR: A roundtable, as a setting, implies that everyone who sits there has equal status. One might wonder whether one really has to sit in a round for it or whether the idealistic thought and the invitation to actively take part, define the implications. Last year I started experimenting with a similar setting, for a project in collaboration with the Japanese-Dutch artist Mariko Kuwahara while in Tokyo, Japan. We staged a food roundtable in Tokyo on which 'traditional Iranian-Japanese food' was served, a food hybrid that was drawing on the very particular history of immigration from Iran to Japan in the late 1980s/early 1990s. 'Traditional Iranian-Japanese food' does not exist, but it actually could have come to life if it wasn't for the mass deportations of Iranian immigrants from Japan at the beginning of the 1990s. Japan also nowadays has strict and inhumane immigration policies, so the setting was hoping to use food and the obsession with food in Japan as a tool to be able to talk about these issues—issues that otherwise might not be addressed often. The project will continue in Japan next year, I am very happy it receives so much support, and am looking forward to more experimental cooking.

**KK: Is an experimental approach essential?**

AR: The settings for the different roundtable discussions are not fixed and also include some unorthodox approaches. For THE FUTURE STATE #04, coming up on 26 July at Goethe Institute London, I am referencing Herodotus' The Histories, Book 1, Chapter 133: "If an important decision is to be made, they [the Persians] discuss the question when they are drunk [...]" This edition will therefore only allow drunk people to join the discussion, and everyone signing up to take part will need to agree to this. Drinks will be provided. Considering the black outlooks of an Iranian future, one might even think about this setting, bordering collapse and chaos, as quite appropriate in contrast to other roundtable settings between professional expertism and somnambulistic utopianism.

**KK: How do you extend it past the realm of those partaking?**

AR: I feel when talking about Iranian histories and present outside of Iran, it is incredibly hard to reach out beyond an Iranian diaspora or people with personal or professional links to the country, and at the same time, not serve common 'easily accessible' clichés and formats. That's why THE FUTURE STATE is choosing its vague, undefined title, to be able to open up the discussion to different versions of subversive, utopian, realistic, pessimistic, optimistic, humoristic, failing states and their futures, and also the idea of thinking of any Iranian futures and their specifics as shared futures in relation to shared histories and shared presents.

I find it especially important to consider this relational perspective, as we are not talking in Iran but from a different country, from the UK, a context that brings both possibilities and problems to the discussions, especially when considering its colonial histories.

**KK: Some projects oriented around solutions – even if hypothetical – rely on academic laurels and often whirl around in discussion-based circles. How can or does THE FUTURE STATE break away from that? What are your ideas for an 'outcome'? And why is it relevant?**

AR: I don't know if it is, but it at least tries to touch upon timely issues in relation to Iran while avoiding sticking to safe peer groups, providing one-way solutions or relying on artistic freedom as an excuse. I am trying to work like this through different projects and formats for quite a while. In 2011 my project Roof Piece Tehran appropriated Trisha Brown's 1971 work Roof Piece, while drawing upon the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections. In 2015, right after the signing of the nuclear deal, I opened a franchise shop for Iranian underwear in Berlin that—while thinking about 'Made in Iran' brandings and stereotypical notions of cultural identity and 'oriental products'—provided a space to discuss possibilities of the agreement, global trade logics and Iranian economics. Now that the deal is under threat and most likely failing, the shop is failing too and I necessarily need to find another space to think. It is yet to see if THE FUTURE STATE can provide for that.