

## Reorient

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# This is Not Iranian by Joobin Bekhrad

<http://www.reorientmag.com/2017/01/anhita-razmi/>

What was I doing near Trafalgar Square? I don't know. Anahita was riding a bicycle, and I remember feeling very short in the presence of her and her boyfriend. Having downed a few beers and feeling the first pangs of hunger, Anahita suggested we look for some good old-fashioned Persian grub – if I knew where to get any nearby. I did, actually; there was one right under our noses named after a magical bird that served cocktails with names like 'Caspian Breeze'. The evening, like most others, passed by in a blur, and as the train sped towards blustering north London, I thought of cream-coloured underwear.

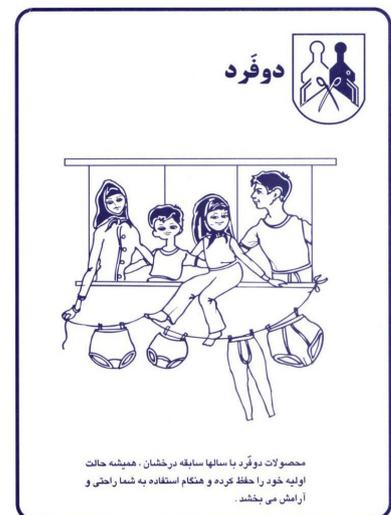
Anahita Razmi's got it all. She sells obscure Iranian underwear in Berlin, drives Paykans around the world, and dances on the rooftops of Tehran. She also happens to have one of the coolest tattoos I've ever seen. With snazzy awards under her belt and a career spanning a wide array of disciplines and themes, her work is currently on display at the National Gallery of Art in Zacheta, Poland. From the other side of the world, I got in touch with her to resume our conversation about Iranian underwear (in a broader context, of course).

### Where in the world are you, Anahita? The last time I checked it was Istanbul.

I'm in Berlin these days, and I don't leave the studio too often. Istanbul was sort of intense; I stayed for six months during very troubled times, which somehow kept me occupied. I didn't do too much studio work ...

### Why?

In Berlin, I live in Kreuzberg, a neighbourhood that for a very long time has been influenced by Turkish immigration. I have quite a few Turkish friends, and am trying to follow Turkish politics. During my stay in Istanbul, the time was very much defined by discussions about what was happening to the country and to the city. I lived close to Taksim Square, and was there during the coup attempt and the following weeks. It was impossible to distance oneself from the events: the restrictions of democracy, the politicisation of Islam, the transformations of public spaces. I think there are many connections to be made between Iran and Turkey, even though the histories of both countries are very different.



**What's happening with the underwear label? How did that even come about? I know you told me when we went for Persian food last year, but I don't remember the details.**

At the beginning of 2015, the possibility that the nuclear deal would happen sometime during the year was imminent, and so I looked at it as a timely moment to start planning to open a shop selling products made in Iran. I love that Do Fard underwear is completely Iranian, yet not typically Middle Eastern in character; it subverts expectations in that sense. If you see the designs, you wouldn't ever refer to it as a typically Oriental product. They aren't carpets or pistachios.

For 75 years, the original Do Fard shop has been in Tehran's Grand Bazaar (Bazaar-e Bozorg). It has rows of old shelves stacked right up to the ceiling with underwear and other goods dating from both before and after the Revolution. I exported the underwear from Iran just before the signing of the nuclear deal. Strict trade sanctions had been imposed on

Iran, and there was no legal way of transferring money to Iranian bank accounts. In opening a Do Fard franchise, I hoped to highlight the difficulties this macro-political situation presented on a micro level. I had to go to Tehran, pay Do Fard in cash, and bring five suitcases of underwear back with me on a plane. Of course, this technically doesn't make sense, looking from the perspective of logistics, profit, and globalised capitalism; but in a wider sense, it raises questions relating to these matters: what contemporary Oriental products are exported, and to where? What does 'made in Iran' stand for? And, what are we expecting from the nuclear deal and its promise of better relations between Iran and the West?

**Right. So, what were your findings? What does 'made in Iran' stand for?**

Through conversations, I found that it stood for very ambivalent things, depending on whom you talked to. A corrupt, undemocratic, and violent regime. An incredible rich history and culture. Postcolonial trauma. Amazing khoreshts. Ta'arof confusions. But, concretely relating it to importing, exporting, and trade, one could say that 'made in Iran' definitely does not stand for internationally operating underwear labels.

**Why not?**

When envisioning free markets and societies, why does one imagine an American Apparel stores opening in Iran, but no Iranian Apparel one in the US? I find it worth thinking about the imbalances of a globalised market and its logics. There is no eye-level exchange to be found there.

**Right. But the question I guess I'm begging to ask is, do you wear the underwear yourself?**

Of course. It's great stuff: very comfortable, very durable, very sexy. I wore them even before the idea of the franchise came about, and bought pairs for my boyfriend as well.



**Leaving underwear aside (no pun intended), let's go back a few years. I first heard of you right after you'd won the Emdash Award ... It must have been 2011. You'd staged this dance performance on a Tehran rooftop with all these people dressed in red ... How did you manage to get away with that?**

It was a very difficult project at the time. I had a commission from the Frieze Foundation to realise something that was legally impossible to in Iran, and that could have had serious consequences; dance performances as such are banned in Iran. At the same time, there were so many impossible things happening in Tehran every day that we just went for it. I planned the thing very well, having a plan B, C, and D in mind all the time in case something happened. I am very thankful that I worked with an amazing team that brought it all to life; I still collaborate frequently with some of them.

I was also very interested in what contextual shifts would bring to the work, which was a direct re-enactment of Trisha Brown's 1971 Roof Piece. By transferring Brown's concept to Tehran, the piece itself got completely different preconditions. And, by bringing the videotaped performance from Tehran to London to exhibit, the precondition of peoples' expectations came in to define how the piece was perceived. Every location change also changed the actual piece.

**Was that around the same time you bought your Paykan?**

Yes. I started the Paykan Project the year before, but it took a long time to complete. It was another 'impossible' project that was very close to failure at a lot of moments. I bought a used Paykan in Tehran and transferred it in a difficult two-month overland journey from Iran to Germany. The Paykan originates from the British Hillman-Hunter model, so it had once made a journey from Europe to Iran. At the time, the journey had a very different context: the UK and Iran were working closely together, and trade and travel were possible – at least for the elites. After the Revolution, Chrysler sold the licenses to produce the model to Iran, and the Paykan became the most common car in Iran. I am in love with it, this everyday object that is so linked to the economic and political history of Iran.

The journey back from Iran to Germany in 2010 and 2011, just when tougher sanctions on Iran had been implemented, was actually legally impossible. I needed lots of patience and help from people in Iran and elsewhere, as well as the right spare parts, as the car had several breakdowns during the long journey.

## Sounds like material for a travelogue. What route did you take?

Yes! Part of the project is actually an 11-hour video showing the journey from Iran to Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, and the Czech Republic, and back to Germany. It is an extended and very slow road movie showing the changing landscape and following the conversations my boyfriend and I have during the trip. There's an awful lot of car talk ... and lots of cheesy Mansour music, as his was the only cassette we had when we left Tehran! I am exhibiting that video, together with the car and 38 framed export papers.

## Believe it or not, I had Dooneh Dooneh playing in my car for some months. Someone had given me a mixtape, and ... whatever ... Do you actually drive that thing around Berlin?

No. Actually, there is no way, as I would have to get a German MOT (Ministry of Transportation) certificate for the car, and that seems very complicated; I would have to change a lot of things in the car, and I don't want to. Anyhow, I do like these circumstances. The car has become a sculpture instead – it has necessarily become one, a sculpture inheriting the narrative of its travel and all its complications. In the end, it has become a symbol in some ways. It isn't useable, by law, and if you relate that to the journeys across borders applying to millions of people nowadays, there are lots of connections to be made.



**You know, I'm still looking for that book, Travels with a Paykan ... But, getting back to your art – The performance on the rooftop was a reference to Trisha Brown. She isn't the only one whose work you've overtly used as a template, though. Middle East Coast West Coast re-enacts a 60s conversation between Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, and there's of course the Tracey Emin link in I've Got it All, Too, and ... that tattoo!**

Yes, I do directly refer to many other artworks in my own art. I like that it provides a way of relating to my work, a possibility to rethink an existing concept through a small shift, or to bring in a new context or theme by connecting things not meant to be connected. I draw very freely from other sources and like to think of art history as something alive and flexible, as something that shouldn't be static.



The conversation between Holt and Smithson, for example, is a very witty and entertaining one that relates to different stereotypes of art and art production on the east and west coasts of the US. By adding the word 'middle' to the original title, East Coast West Coast, the conversation is somehow relocated ... Even if locations are all bleeped out in the conversation, you'd most likely associate everything with an Islamic context. Then, one might ask which part of the conversation actually fit into this new context, and which persona fit the veil. Are the stereotypes in relation to Islam and the Middle East comparable to the ones discussed in the conversation between Smithson and Holt, or are they different? And, is Middle East Coast West Coast a 'chador art' version of its original?

**You can tell me more about that next the time we go for yummy khoreshs. That tattoo, though ... I thought you'd just written on your arm with a marker or something; I wasn't expecting it to be real. But it is!**

Of course it is! It says, 'This is Not Iranian' in Persian. I like that it's a real and permanent branding, and at the same time, through its meaning, isn't. Like Magritte's Ceci n'est Pas Une Pipe, or Jafar Panahi's This is Not a Film, to talk about Iranian contexts.

## Do you really feel that way? That you aren't Iranian?

It's more of an ambivalent statement instead of a clear message; but, of course, it also refers to my identity. I like the idea than an identity is something that one constructs, something that is at all times flexible and changing. I also like to play with it. I was born in Germany, and don't speak good Persian. If someone nevertheless wants to brand me an 'Iranian artist', I let

them do so, even though I'd never say such a thing myself. I find it more interesting if works have blank spaces and gaps that are to be filled by someone else.

**That piece (This is Not Iranian) is part of an ongoing exhibition in Poland right now of artists described as 'modern urban nomads'. The gallery has even used the work as the cover of the exhibition catalogue. Do you feel that term describes you?**

Actually, I am not sure what 'modern' or 'urban' means in this case, as they seem like hip terms to describe things that are often nothing other than precariousness. But yes, I have been, and keep on moving a lot for art residencies as well as to produce new work. It's been fun so far, changing environments all the time, but of course also tiring. At the same time, I feel that working from the position of an outsider – that is, not settled and comfortable somewhere – has taught and influenced me a lot. I am not interested in having a set ground on and coterie [in which] to produce and show works. And as long as one can feel at home somewhere, extensive travelling is the best thing that can happen to one, isn't it? It allows one to see things anew, to rethink and reconsider them.

**I guess so. Is home Berlin, then? I, for one, have completely given up on the idea of looking for somewhere to call 'home'.**

But home can also mean feeling at home by being with friends, or just keeping certain habits in different places, no? Good company makes me feel at home. My mum's potato salad recipe, too.

**So when are you going to take me for a spin in that Paykan? I promise we won't get caught.**

Hmm ... You can sit inside it, if you want, maybe touch and smell it, too. Join the Paykan fetishists!