

Rethinking Geography | Towards a new Internationalism in the arts

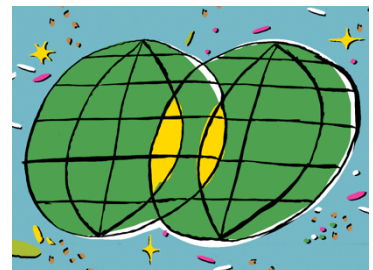
Conversation with Golrokh Nafisi, Iranian visual and performance artist



Golrokh Nafisi is an illustrator, animator, and puppet maker born in Isfahan, Iran. She studied at the Art University of Tehran, and at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in the Netherlands. Golrokh experiments with performances in the public space and is interested in discovering new forms of collective actions involving bodies and human ideologies. She has frequently exhibited her work as interventions and performances in galleries and festivals, among which Art Rotterdam in the Netherlands, MACRO in Italy, and Beirut Art Center in Lebanon.

In this conversation, Golrokh speaks about the local dimension of internationalism in the arts, about the current politics of the art market and the urgent need for a new economy in the arts based on more solidarity between artists and institutions. She points at the huge gaps and the growing inequalities that are ruling the practice of thousands of artists in Iran and around the world, but also at the hope that can be brought through community and collectiveness.

This conversation was conducted online by Jumana Al-Yasiri on August 2, 2022. Commissioned by the Flanders Arts Institute in the framework of A Fair New Idea?! initiative: 'Sustainability and International Collaboration in the Arts'.



Golrokh, you are an artist, illustrator, author and puppet maker based in Tehran. You were trained as an artist in Iran and the Netherlands, where you often present your

work. You have also developed projects and collaborations in other countries, such as Egypt, Lebanon and Italy. I know that the question of internationalism is something that often comes back in your work. You told me once that internationalism today is problematic and that we need to connect our geographies differently. As a female artist living and working in Tehran, how do you experience internationalism in the arts today?

I feel the urgency to create a new internationalism, but I also think that first we must think about nationalism, which is part of this world 'internationalism', and we must rethink and redefine the idea of 'nation'. Because nationalism also ties in with the history of racism, borders, violence, and at the same time with the history of liberation against colonialism, against imperialism. We all experienced the moment that we were among people who were carrying a flag that represented their nation, and sometimes it was the sign of liberation. So I think we must carefully rethink and redefine the idea of 'nation' and the idea of 'nationalism', and we shouldn't accept the borders that we already live in. By rethinking nationalism and its history, we can start to share it with other people and create a new internationalism. This new internationalism definitely should be related to geography and to the ground, the soil that we are standing on, and also the trace of the people that are caught by the idea of nationalism. So I am convinced that the new internationalism that we all dream about must start from thinking about geography and thinking about the history of nationalism.

In 2016, after graduating from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in the Netherlands, you decided to return to Iran. One might be intrigued by this decision, especially given the current geopolitical context. How does the question of sustainability in the art, of making it as an artist, resonate with your own career path, but also in the larger context of the Iranian artistic landscapes? I mean, to what extent do you feel supported as an artist by the system in your country and beyond?

There is something called 'return', and the whole phenomenon of return is something that I definitely appreciate. It creates a different kind of character, especially in art and in my own artistic practice, because I think with migration you grow, you learn to see the world differently, and in return you can see all of these changes in perspective.

You can see how much you have changed by moving from one place to another. I don't think that 'return' is always the actual return to a place that we call home. I think 'return' can be a return to a specific time or a specific idea or to the moment of revolution or to the moment of hope in an uprising. In my case, the return was actually to my city, which I call home, Tehran. I learned a lot by exploring the idea of 'return'.

In terms of sustainability, of course we live in a really unstable economy, which means unstable politics, which means unstable institutions. There is also sustainability in terms of

friendship, relationship, the community and society around you. We can create sustainable love and friendship, but this sustainability never becomes formal. It never becomes part of the formal economy. We have both an informal economy and really unstable ground, but at the same time a kind of stable community that you lean on and can trust.

You were speaking about the economic pressure and there is, of course, an economic dimension to our conversation today. In addition to the question of sustainability, one Fair New Idea participant reflected on the growing inequalities between artistic communities from the white European Centre and the rest of the world, but also between artists and cultural workers as individuals and the institutions who have the power and the resources to set the rules of the art world and the arts market. How can we as individuals respond to these inequalities in our local contexts, but also in the broader context of the global creative community?

The inequality is huge and insane, and I think the main reason is that we live in different currencies, living in a currency of euros or dollars. Because of the drop of euros nowadays, maybe people who live in the euro system have some understanding of inflation. But in our region, in countries such as Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, and so on, the currency is dropping every day. We are talking about the price of edible items such as bread, fruit, vegetables, the price of which changes on a daily basis. Like when you wake up, you go to a grocery shop and you don't know how much you have to pay because it's different from yesterday. I think this level of instability comes from economic inequality and I don't see awareness about these things in art institutions or even amongst my European artist friends. I also don't see any understanding of these differences. Most of the time when we talk about differences between here and there, of course there is this discourse about censorship, freedom, which is definitely valuable for its context; but now when we are talking about inequality, we are talking about a huge gap between our current economy and a euro, dollar or pound economy or other Western currency. I think this is systemic because if you think about this, then you see how even within European borders the difference between east and south of Europe and the north and west of Europe is huge. Like, what is happening in the economic situation in the east of Europe is a catastrophe compared to the west of Europe. By seeing this, by understanding this, we also understand that we live in one global economy that creates inequality. It's based on inequality. I think the moment that we become aware of this, is a moment that we can imagine a different type of economy. Instead of thinking: 'What can we do to make the situation more equal?', we must think about how we need radical change in the way that we live and in the economy that we are all connected to, to actually stand against inequality.

What our readers don't know is that we struggled to connect and to make this call. I think that we also need to speak about the digital inequalities in the world today,

especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. A lot of things are happening online and even before, the Western world very much relies on the Internet, but there are inequalities in terms of accessing data, in terms of electricity cuts in parts of the world or even free access to the digital sphere. For you as an artist today, do you experience a digital inequality in your practice?

Definitely. I think digital inequality is not only about infrastructure, there is also a huge form of inequality between people who live in Tehran and people who live in small towns somewhere on the top of a mountain. There are huge differences within Iran itself. The Internet as a free platform that we can all connect to and we can freely express ourselves in is an illusion that has to stop. We must understand this is a commercial platform, especially when it comes to social media, which are supposed to bring people together. It's a commercial platform based on competition, based on created currency, which I think is fundamentally neoliberal economics that is somehow applying to all of our lives in different areas. Communication between people, education or for example, in my form of art with collaboration and participation must be free from commercial worlds. Otherwise, there is nothing between us, everything becomes viable or sellable. To protect ourselves from Silicon Valley ideology, or call it from the algorithm world, which is based on marketing strategy, we must be creative, we must create parallel platforms that are not passing through big commercial companies. Think of all our communication, almost 90% of our communication is now passing through one company, and I think this is insane and definitely not democratic. There is digital inequality in terms of an infrastructure gap between people in different areas in the world, and also within those areas between privileged people who can use it and others who can't. There is a constant inequality between, for example, a Palestinian whose pages are banned in the middle of an uprising in Palestine because the violence in the image is against Instagram protocols, and someone who can express himself freely like Donald Trump on Twitter.

When we were preparing this conversation, I asked you if you present the same work in Iran and internationally? I was thinking of course about censorship, given the fact that you're a female artist who lives and works in Tehran, but also because your work is very political. You answered that 'it's only the dream of the institutions to show us as global artists who are the same person everywhere'. What changes in your work when you are inside or outside Iran?

I'm the same person when I work in Tehran or Amsterdam, but the ground under my feet is different and my audience is different. The soil, the weather, the climate, and the socio-political system are different in Tehran and Amsterdam. The whole texture around me, the context of saying something is also different. I think that arts institutions try to demolish this context, and for a long time they have been moving artworks from here and there with no

context. Institutions try to sell the idea that it doesn't matter if you see this painting here or there, because the painting itself is valuable and can be universal, it can be global. The idea of a global market didn't create solidarity between people, it didn't build any bridges between people here and there, but it did build a really strong bridge between capitals. So in my own strategy, I try to work when I'm in Tehran, I try to create within the context and the platform that I stand on, I try to talk to people around me with an understanding, like common understanding. In Amsterdam, where I'm an immigrant and where I don't know that much about the society, I still try my best to communicate. If you look at that work, it's clear that it is made in Amsterdam for people in Amsterdam, for the context of Amsterdam. I can give an example: one time I was working with the barriers in the city, in an urban landscape, and I was working with those blocks that are famous in Tehran, Cairo and Beirut, and in many other cities in the region. Crowds and people on the street are controlled by these blocks that appear here and there for different reasons. In Iran, if you don't pay taxes, they place them in front of your shop. In Cairo, they guided the protest during the time of the uprising [2011]. In Beirut, they use these blocks to correct the lack of urban planning. I made works about them and I was happy and satisfied to show the similarities; but when I wanted to come to Amsterdam, I didn't bring those works. I brought them once for a fair, but later on, I felt that the level of exoticism and misunderstanding of the audience was really huge. For another individual exhibition, I started to study the fences and barriers that the Dutch government uses for urban landscapes, and I made a series of those barriers. Now, when you see these works next to each other, definitely all of them are about how power structures and controls crowd in the public space, but differently in Tehran or Cairo or Amsterdam¹. So for me, it's really important to create the context and then work on it instead of moving your works as objects in the service of context. Less global market.

As a multidisciplinary artist who lives in a place like Tehran while also having all these connections in the Middle East and Europe, what do you need to feel that your career and your work are really sustained and valued by the art markets and audiences?

I don't see any stability in my profession and my career. Of course this creates lots of anxiety. How do I deal with this anxiety? Through solidarity with lots of other people like me. I don't think that I am an exceptional artist with a really exceptional way of working. There are few artists who can be successful in the art market or in communication with art institutions, then you have thousands of other artists who live between institutions and markets. They question themselves every day whether to make something they can sell or

¹ *Past Imperfect*, 2019.

to look for funding? Or is it safe to get funds and then work there? These are common questions for thousands of artists who are graduating every year from various art academies, they never learn how to achieve any form of stability. Again, I think it is because of the global economy that is forcing the art world during the past few decades, becoming the main economic structure.

So personally, I feel that if we think about different aesthetics and creating new aesthetics or creating new forms at the same time, we must also think about a new economy. I mean, even as an impossible project, we must break this wall that we always have to earn money from art. At the same time, I don't think that we should have side jobs and then bring the money to art as a hobby. I think we must fundamentally think differently. We can also imagine art in the service of different professions or in collaboration with different professions. For example, with the human sciences, we must break this wall between human sciences, arts, and science in general. Can we imagine collectives and collaborations between these people in a form of economy where there is a budget for a project that has an artistic link, a scientific link and an anthropological component? I think we can also imagine a new form of economy.

You also asked about the links between here [Iran], the Arab world and Europe, whether these connections and networks create any stability? In my mind, no. I don't think these connections are creating professional or career-based stability, but they create lots of hope for me in terms of solidarity, understanding, having common politics in these dark times, and having a friend in Lebanon who experiences the same economic crisis as I do, or my Arab friends in Europe that are facing the same problems I did when I lived there. It creates hope for me that I'm not isolated or alone, the hope that maybe one day we may also create a new economy together.

You were speaking about solidarity and not feeling alone, looking for people who understand us and are like us, even if they live in other parts of the world. I personally think that the international aspect of our work as artists and cultural practitioners always starts from somewhere very local, somewhere very personal. I know that the question of locality is something that crosses your work and drives your collaborations in different parts of the world. You were speaking at the beginning of this conversation about nationalism... In your opinion, how does the local inform and even negotiate with the international in the arts today?

You are absolutely right. Locality is my favourite topic and it is also changing in our time. I think we must redefine the idea of 'local', which is actually linked to the question of territory. As much as we zoom in on this locality, we can become more accurate about what we are talking about and we can be sharper and create more aesthetic content. I think your locality can change from the space of your home, which happened in the beginning of the pandemic, to the locality of your neighbourhood or your town or your city. Then, it can

become your belonging to what you call a 'country', for which I prefer another word, *Vatan* [the Persian word for home or homeland], which is similar among many people from the north of Africa to the west of India.

I think the locality can change from these different sizes, these different scales, for having a territory in your mind or to land in a territory in your mind. It helps you to create content that later on you can share with your comrades around the world, with the same horizon of justice and freedom. You can share your content with them and say: This is my locality and then you can find a trace between them, which definitely is a geographical trace. I don't think that we can skip geography because one of the biggest things in our time is to understand the new climate situation that we live in, which means we have to go back to the ground and connect things through geography. We have to create a map that connects our locality to someone else's locality, and it doesn't matter if there are thousands of kilometres between our towns, we can do it carefully. We can see how climates are changing from one land to another, and by understanding these differences, we can connect our locality to our international dream.

The participants of A Fair New Idea?! were also very much interested in the question of language in international artistic collaborations. When we speak about territories, we also speak about languages. We all know that English is often the dominant language in the international art markets and networks. I know that you are personally interested in finding other linguistic connections through art and translations between Farsi, Arabic, and Urdu. For example, we're speaking here about an alliance between the languages of what are considered to be the margins of the contemporary arts world. Could you tell us more about the place of language in your work as an artist, but also as an observer of the field?

I think this is one of the most important issues. I studied in Rietveld Academy and we were at that time from 69 nationalities and we all spoke in broken English with many mistakes. I think we didn't even speak in English that much. We built a language together to communicate. The conclusion was that translation is not enough for me. It was an experience of seeing how one language is not enough to connect many different languages together. It was also another sign to see how English for communication creates a hierarchy between people who are connected through Latin languages, at least through the alphabet, and other people who are writing right to left. They have different systems of thinking, and now they have to communicate in this other language. What I feel is kind of a solution is to connect languages slowly, carefully, but not by translation, rather by common understanding through the culture and politics, and again, by the texture and context of the language itself.²

² *You may say I'm a dreamer... but I'm the only one, 2014*

For example, the latest book that I made with my friend and colleague in Italy, Julia Crispin, is called *Sorrow*, which has the same word in Farsi, Arabic and Urdu [gham]. We tried to illustrate and write all of the expressions around the world of 'sorrow', and I often wrote things in my illustration in Farsi, and then I explained that expression about sorrow to my friend Julia who wrote things that were not like a word-by-word translation, but were an expression in Italian. Our communication about the book was in English. So you see Arabic and Farsi words with illustrations, and then Italian and English sentences. Any person who speaks one of these languages can read and see part of the book. The book itself is generous and open to all people, but it doesn't mean that it has to be translated in all languages in the same way. I think this is similar to other feelings as well. There are words which are not translatable and we must create a texture around them. We must weave the words together one by one, carefully and slowly, to see if one day we can have a common language or not. But yes, definitely, the language that we are now communicating with is not enough.

Golrokh, we are coming to the end of our conversation. Before we leave, do you have a new idea about the future of the international arts sector that you'd like to share with us, how to make it fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable?

For sure, I think we must stand against many things that are offered to us. One of the most important elements that I want to stand against is competition. In the international art world that we experience, competition plays a really important role in festivals and awards. This system of competition always creates a window of individuals next to each other, with the obsession of knowing how many are in this window and who they are. For example, do we have a black person? Do we have a woman? I think this idea never becomes inclusive enough. To create a new definition of inclusiveness, we must think about participation, collaboration, and connectedness instead of competition. For that, again, we have to find the common resistance or a subject of solidarity that can bring us together, and that can create a vision and hope that makes it possible for us to work together. You see a huge anxiety in the art world because of the constant competition for awards or funds or opportunities for a residency, which makes it impossible for people to work together. People are constantly worried that someone else is taking their place. Imagine the change that can happen all of a sudden if we all saw ourselves in a movement, in a wave or in a collective in which each of us has their own role. Instead of having one big prize for one individual, we could have a small budget for several modest art projects. And this is not that impossible. This is not like dreaming of flying to the moon. This is the minimum thing that we must expect and we must try to realise. We need to connect one by one to each other

and start from the bottom of the place that we are in, from the ground that we live on, to actually draw a new map. That's my dream about internationalism. From everywhere we are standing, we start to make a new map and one day these maps will reach each other. Then we would have thousands of solutions of working together instead of one formula to homogenise all of us in one form of internationalism.

Thank you so much, Golrokh. I couldn't agree with you more about competition amongst artists and the role of the institutions in pushing towards this competition. I think that part of how to encourage collectives in the international art world today is definitely, as you said, by pushing towards more participation and solidarity rather than this endless circle of awards and grants.