

Grammars of the figure in the Iranian Uprising

Austin Gross

In modern times, the present becomes a didactic question. The new must be learned and there is no textbook.

The readings that follow were stirred by images from the streets of Iran and by a pseudonymous author's early attempt to conceptualise her present.¹ Her essay, under the byline 'L', took stock of new forms of action as they emerged and of the powers of the image that animated them.

But we will begin with another scene: a dressing room at the *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm* in Weimar-era Berlin.

In the summer of 1934, Walter Benjamin jotted an abrége of a conversation with Bertolt Brecht on the subject of didactic poetry. Brecht took one of his own *Lehrgedichte* as example, a 'didactic poem on the art of acting for Carola Neher.'² Two variants exist,³ but only one fits their conversation, and it is, as yet, untranslated.

Advice to the actress C.N.

Refresh yourself, friend

From ice-water in the copper bowl

– Open your eyes, underwater, wash them –

Dry yourself with the rough towel and read

The difficult lines of your part from the sheet on the wall.

Know: this you do for yourself and do it exemplarily.⁴

Carola Neher was Brecht's star for whom he wrote the part of Polly Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera*. This didactic poem speaks to her backstage. We are invited to eavesdrop.

According to Brecht, Carola Neher learned from him how to wash her face.⁵ That is, to give a new purpose to the same actions. She had hitherto washed 'so as not to be dirty',⁶ to be presentable, or pleasing. What she

learns is to wash without why: 'this you do for yourself, *für dich*.'

Für sich has no one-to-one equivalent in English. In everyday German, it more often means *per se* than *pro se*. Valences of 'this you do by yourself' and '... on your own' are pertinent too. But downhill the verse, past 'and', we are taught something new. Here, the didactic poem speaks of exemplarity.

When C.N. performs, she does not follow a model, but authorises herself from herself. Virtuosity in acting consists in this self-authorisation. Yet C.N. does not refuse to learn, that is, does not claim the authority of raw impulse or nature. She learns her part, and she learns by example: her own. Her art, the art of the actor, which she perfected, sustains itself in learning and teaching 'for herself', without why and without graduation.

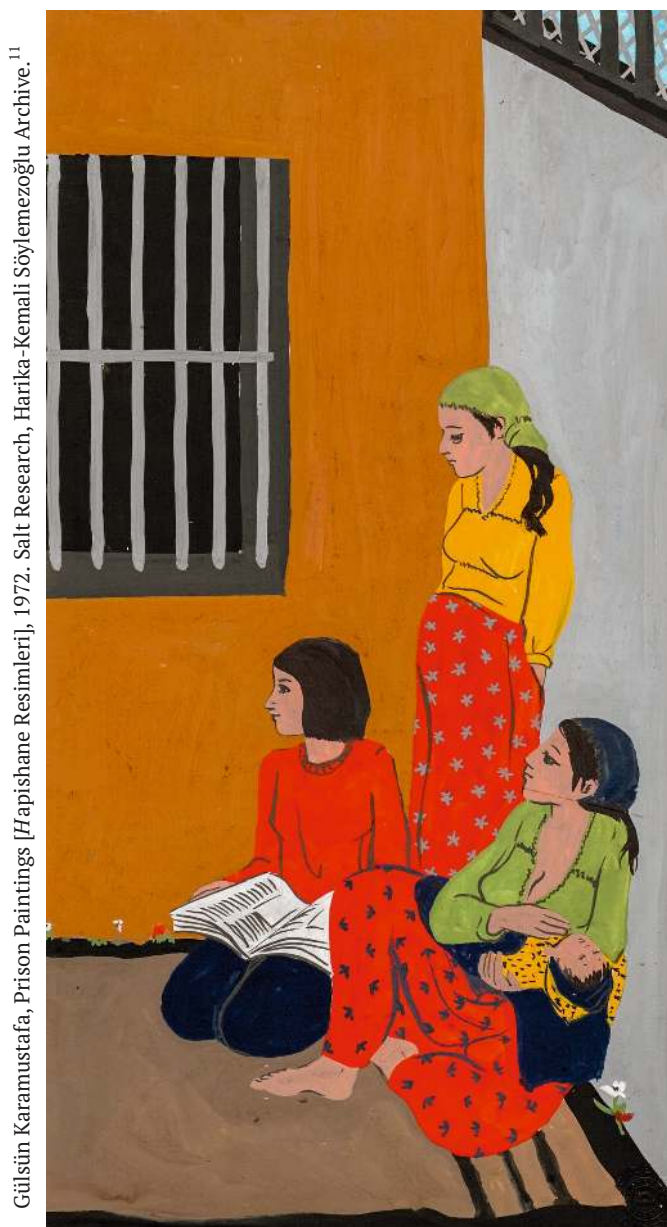
Between C.N. and herself, teacher and learner, a third element intervenes: a ferry between two banks. This element is an image (*Vor-bild*). Here, Brecht's poem concedes its limit. What verses give to overhear, C.N. can show.

Twelve days after Jina Amini's murder, when Jina had already metamorphosed into *Jin* and *Jiyan* (Woman and Life), and the Kurdish slogan, *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom), echoed in every translation,⁷ an essay was published on the website of a women's safety organisation, Harass Watch.⁸ Both of the English translations available online drop part of the title, so I'll start out by reproducing it in full. What comes first is a subheading. The main title follows.

انقلاب فیگوراتیو زنانه؛ اندرکنش بدن‌ها و تصاویرشان

Feminine Figurative Revolution; Interplay between
Bodies and their Images

L proposed a history of her present, in the course of an uprising that drew its poetry from the future. She identified what she named 'figure' as the uprising's singularity and 'character.'¹⁰ For L, nothing discursive, no slogan could come close; not even 'Woman, Life, Freedom.'



Gülsün Karamustafa, Prison Paintings [Hapishane Resimleri], 1972. Salt Research, Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive.¹¹

As L develops the concept of the figure, she cites and interprets a series of examples. Almost all of them are photos or stills which had become so much a part of the daily life of Iranians in those weeks that she had no need to include them in her essay. Others are drawn

from deeper 'within the mirror', from 'the figure of all the women before her ...'

The figure of the sitting woman. The figure of the standing woman. The figure of the woman carrying a sign in Tabriz, eye-to-eye with the forces of repression. The figure of the woman who ties her hair. The picture of the dance circle around a bonfire in Bandar Abbas.

She is silent, in action or dancing. She is in action, yet 'fixed' in freeze-frame; she is not here to please, or to impress; she is not the figure of an individual, a face belonging to a name; she is in profile and she is a crowd, from a wide angle; she does not distinguish herself from others, like a soldier from a civilian; her gesture is 'everyday', or, one could also say, 'everyone's'; she is distinctive, yet anyone. These images lay a formal outline of the figure.

But to define the figure by what is in the picture would miss the point, as it would to equate C.N.'s exemplarity with a bowl of water and a rough towel. The figure is not something that can be hung on a wall or saved to disk. It 'drives' us, 'stimulates'. Or, put the other way round, I 'strike' a figure. From either side, a figure is not seen, but 'takes'. There is no such thing as 'prefiguration'. The image does not precede the act.

The space between me and the images I had desired had grown very small. I myself *was* those images. I would suddenly see myself in a circle burning headscarves, as though we had always been burning scarves. [...]

You say to yourself that you should light a cigarette, and you see yourself there, [already] smoking a cigarette. You say: I should get going, and you see yourself in the crowd. You've been there the whole time.¹²

L also calls this temporality 'warmth': a Farsi expression, akin to 'the heat of the moment' but different in scope and without the connotation of transgression. When the body is 'warm', writes L, I am not afraid, and my actions go beyond my fear and my intentions.

The body is 'warm' when it is being beaten, and we don't experience pain in the way we might expect. Then you say to yourself that you should light a cigarette, and you see yourself there, smoking a cigarette. You say: I should get going, and you see yourself in the crowd. You've been there the whole time.

In 'warmth', she outruns herself. She suddenly is, has become, her own figure.

The figure is a tense, writes L: 'present perfect'. But is that all? It's true that the present perfect excludes intention and abrogates distances: 'I have been there the whole time.' But the figure has its own hope, and its own power of promise.

The figure is not a promise given to L, nor hers to the future. L writes of '[t]he desire to be that promissory figure.'¹³ To be that promise, 'for herself.'

L does not refer to Brecht's didactic poem, any more than she employs the word 'didactic'. Yet her concept of figure opens a new angle on the didactic *Vor-bild*: C.N.'s self-exemplarity is also performed in a kind of present perfect. Producing her own example, she has outrun herself in a sense. But she has done so within the ethical self-relation denoted by 'for yourself'. L, for her part, has left her own behind.

Now, the figure has freed itself from the bondage of the face. It is a general, faceless figure, covered with a mask, effaced for reasons of security, an image shot from behind, nameless, anonymous.

Nonetheless, in L's paratext, names, faces and secrets steal onto the stage. She opens with a dedication: '*For Zhina [or Jina], for Niloofar, for Elaheh, for Mahsa, for Elmira, and for those whose names I have yet to call*'.¹⁴ Some are the names of women killed or imprisoned, but L invokes each by first name. The byline carries an endnote glossing the pseudonym, the letter 'L'. The letter, she says, alludes to something private from her relationship to her beloved. In a way, it's something more intimate than her legal name.

My beloved once chose to title a project 'L' that may or may not have been referring to me. Engrossed in the experience of this revolutionary space, so akin to the experience of love, I want to push aside my constant hesitation about this L's reference, and instead own it along with my beloved's gesture. My signing of this essay as L is a revolutionary appropriation of [their] gesture. This naming not only keeps me secure from the threats of government forces, but frees me in my idea of love, at the very moment that names have become ciphers [*ramz*].¹⁵

This endnote places the entire essay under love's sign. Her love for her beloved and her love for the people on the street pass into one another, by the intercession of a name that has become a password or symbol (*ramz*), a mediator between her text and her endnotes.

The essay's third and final endnote is the longest of the three. L 'render[s] common' a private letter which she had written to her beloved in 2020. In the present of the uprising, she says, her letter has become common property. And, in fact, the entirety of her essay was its commentary.

A video had been circulating online of the liberation of Qasr Prison in 1979. We see the freed inmates and their loved ones embrace on the square in front of the prison.¹⁶ L was struck by a face.

I wrote to my beloved after I watched a viral video of the opening [*bâz*] of the gates of Qasr Prison and the freeing of political prisoners months before the 1979 Revolution. I wrote this on August 2, 2020:

'Tonight I saw the video of the freeing [*âzādī*] of prisoners on the internet. Again and again. Would that I could be the one brushing that woman's hair aside from her forehead? ... You need not say anything. It's enough to brush aside the hair from the forehead in front of you to recognize her and become certain that she is there, and it's you who reveals her face.

Is it you?

Yes, it's me.

A face for everyone. ... How can you recognize someone in the crowd in the moment of revolution? When every organ of the body goes beyond its self-awareness and the ways it has learned to be. By brushing aside the hair and seeking a rare memory. A black mole next to the right ear ...'

I now make this private letter common property in these revolutionary conditions :) This letter no longer belongs only to my beloved, but to all the bodies on the street that I have loved so dearly.¹⁷

The heart of L's essay beats here, in the mirroring alternation between collective figures and the beloved to whom she writes under the image of a face revealed and recognised in the lightness of a lock of hair stubbornly tumbling over her brow as we take our first giddy steps in the open.

But to state the hard fact: prison was coming. The regime answered Woman, Life, Freedom the only way they knew how: brutal, stupid force, a slap in the face, despite the would-be subtleties of their secret police and intelligence agents. The people on the street were beaten and killed. Thousands of girls were poisoned through school

lunches because women had made something so powerful happen. Protestors were convicted on the basis of forced confessions, that is, confessions extracted under psychological and physical torture, as well as the threat of retaliation against family members. They were served prison sentences, others executed.

In solitary confinement, in the interrogation room, what image will help you? Off the street, out of the open, without the moment's warmth, is a figure still yours?

The courage of long-time political prisoners, like Niloufar Bayani, Morad Tahbaz, Sepideh Kashani-Doust, Sepideh Qolijan ... became very important. A friend of mine, who is an ex-inmate of Evin Prison, worked all autumn to get their statements published. She told me: 'Most young people don't know yet what they will face. They have mostly not done prison time. That's why it's so important to write, now, to warn them about the tactics and psychological torture that will be used to extract forced confessions. So that they can resist it, and not be surprised, and know that others have made it through, and that if they crack they do not need to feel ashamed. It is important for the long-term prisoners to speak, now.'

In 1937, Brecht learned that Carola Neher, who had also fled in 1933, was now a prisoner in a camp in the Soviet Union. He wrote a second *Lehrgedicht* for her, truer and deeper than the first, which he never published. No longer 'to' her, because no letter could reach her, the poem was placed under her initials.

Washing¹⁸

C.N.¹⁹

When I showed you years ago
 How you should wash yourself in the early morning
 With bits of ice in the water
 Of the little copper pot
 Plunging face in, eyes open
 While you patted dry with the rough towel
 I read, from the sheet on the wall, the heavy lines
 Of your role, and said:
 This you do for yourself and do it
 Exemplarily [*vorbildlich*].

Now I hear, you must be in captivity.
 The letters I wrote for you [*für dich*]
 Remain unanswered. The friends I approached for you
 Are silent. I can do nothing for you. How
 Might your morning be? Will you still do something for
 yourself [*für dich*]?
 Hopefully and responsibly
 With good movements, exemplary ones?

Its first stanza recollects Brecht's first poem, but prison casts a shadow on the memory. The time of day has changed. C.N. is no longer washing to 'refresh' herself amidst a day's work, but in the early morning, to begin another day and stay human. 'The heavy lines of your role': we reread their difficulty, where *schwierig* becomes *schwer* ... The same lesson, *verbatim*, closes the stanza, but, in prison, this lesson changes meaning. History has brought out its consequences.

Care and exemplarity – the 'for yourself', forwards and backwards – make it possible to go on learning and teaching in prison. The way C.N. has learned to learn is the only one that can allow her to study after losing the open world. But nothing is guaranteed. We are not with her. Her morning is the night of a question.

At the poem's end, new words appear: 'Hopefully and responsibly.' No promise is given from outside. This hope, this promise, she must become it. If she can, at all.

G. Karamustafa, Prison Paintings, 1972. Salt Research. Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive.



When she was free, Carola Neher knew how to teach and learn ‘for herself’, ‘on her own’. Can she do so where she is today?

Like the first, this poem too concedes its limit: however her morning may be, it is for everyone else a night. Yet an image of the night, of the question of the morning and the act that answers it, is what we so much wish for, today, what we need to stay brave as the state cracks down. But now the actor’s art forsakes us. Eurydice, an image that falls.

I remember another conversation with my friend. She was angry about the mess that new, especially short-term, inmates make. ‘There are rules in the ward! Some new prisoners come in and do whatever they want ... TV blasting, at all hours, messes in the common space ... But they know *nothing*. You just got here, to serve a short sentence, but the ward has been here for decades, and I’ve been here for four years, and N was a prisoner for twelve years already.’

‘They made me so angry. Always drama and a lot of noise; they completely disrespect P, or S. She has been through enough, just listen to her and don’t make a constant annoyance. But there are always new ones, and it’s always the same headache.’

‘You were also new’, I replied. ‘But you weren’t like that. Maybe that’s what helped you, I mean, helped you not to crack.’

‘Everybody cracks.’

‘But when you cracked, you weren’t alone, and you had teachers. You could ask N or P for advice, “Please, tell me how you’ve held yourself together.”’

‘No, you don’t bother her. She has enough.’

‘Oh’, I said and shut up.

‘You don’t have to ask her. Just watch her walk.’

Under international pressure, the state tried to save appearances. In mid-March, one of my friend’s fellow-prisoners was released from Evin. She had served almost five years for taking part in the worker’s struggle at the Haft Tappeh sugarcane mill. BBC Persian and other news outlets reposted a video of her release.²⁰

In the short video, Sepideh Qolliyan is skipping down the hill in front of Evin prison. She is red and gold from head to toe, bouquets in both hands and under her arms,

overflowing, with rings of flowers on her head.

As she bounces down the street, she spins around, cups a hand to her mouth, and sings from the bottom of her lungs.

Khamenei, you are Zahhāk, we will put you underground.²¹

Someone touches her elbow, trying, it seems, to retain her. She yells again.

Khamenei, you are Zahhāk, we will put you underground.

The whole clip lasts only a few seconds, then loops.

She was dressed for celebration and her song meant, ‘Who do you think you’ll fool, granting concessions as though it were all a misunderstanding? Do you think I will thank you for my release, after you took five years of my life away? Hypocrites. Do you think we will stop now, as you give ground? You’re afraid. You’re on your back foot now, and we’ll push, and you’ll fall.’

I shared her image with everyone I knew because of the hope it gave me, and bounced with her joy, all day, not knowing that she was arrested hours later. Her mother too. They were driving south, towards their home. The intelligence service took her to Block 209 at Evin Prison, the interrogation block where those who are arrested are kept, at first, in solitary confinement for an undefined duration. It is a place where people are tortured and threatened, psychologically and physically, in order to force a confession.

The second image unplugged the first. It was unbearable to see her again in her dress with her flowers because it was impossible to see both images at the same time. Her morning was just a question.

But after the shock, one sees that she knew. She knew exactly what would happen. If you can stand to look at her again, you’ll see where she is. It is already there, in her smile, song, bounce. There are not two images, here, a day and a night, but one. Sepideh’s sun. Nothing was secret.

Brecht could only ask how C.N.’s mornings might be; whether she did something ‘for herself’, whether she washed ‘hopefully and responsibly’. What he can’t say, and she can’t show, Sepideh Qolliyan radiates. Just watch her walk.



G. Karamustafa, Prison Paintings, 1972. Salt Research, Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive. [Political prisoner Sepideh Qollian shared this painting on her Instagram account on September 9, 2021, with a post reporting on the conditions of those living in Bushehr Central Prison.]

These pages are a shadow cast by the figures of the Iranian uprising.

A figure ‘takes’ in a situation, when someone runs ahead of herself, when she ‘strikes’ its pose before she expects it. Because this was not my case the figures of the Iranian uprising were never truly figures for me. The shadow they cast was, yes, hope. But my words do not carry any risk. Only, under her initials, the break between my *for* and *you*.

In the first days of the uprising, a grammatical figure crystallised on Persian social media: *baraye*, ‘for’. Shervin Hajipour collected around thirty *baraye* from social media and set them to music.²²

Some are hopes or loyalties; others denounce or refuse. All are promises and each promise is its author’s own. Like Sepideh Qolliyan and so many others, Shervin Hajipour was arrested, full of hope and staking everything.

Baraye (‘For’)²³

For dancing in the alleys
 For the fear when kissing
 For my sister, your sister, our sisters
 For changing rusted minds
 For the shame of poverty
 For the regret of living an ordinary life
 For the dumpster-diving children and their wishes
 For this dictatorial economy
 For this polluted air
 For Valiasr and its worn-out trees
 For Pirooz and the possibility of his extinction
 For the innocent banned stray dogs
 For the unstoppable tears
 For the scene of repeating this moment
 For the smiling faces
 For students and their future
 For this forced heaven
 For the imprisoned elite students
 For the Afghan kids
 For all these fors that are beyond repetition

For all of these meaningless slogans
 For the collapse of fake buildings
 For the feeling of peace
 For the sun after these long nights
 For anxiety and sleeping pills
 For man, homeland, prosperity

For the girl who wished to be a boy
 For woman, life, freedom
 For freedom
 For freedom
 For freedom²⁴

Notes

1. Published first on Harass Watch in the second week of the uprising (counting from Mahsa Amini's murder on September 16 2022).
2. Walter Benjamin, 'Notizen Svendborg Sommer 1934', in *Gesammelte Schriften. 6: Fragmente, autobiographische Schriften*, 1. Aufl., [Nachdr.], Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 936 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 524. My translation.
3. Benjamin's German editors (GS6, 816) refer to an early-1930s title, 'Advice to the actress C. N.' ('*Rat an die Schauspielerin C. N.*'). This is, however, the title of two different poems, of which only one treats the 'art of the actor.' The relevant version is, however, absent from Brecht's Suhrkamp *Gesammelte Werke*. Fortunately, it was included in the *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, or BFA, of Brecht's works. See Joyce Crick, 'Power and Powerlessness: Brecht's Poems to Carola Neher', *German Life and Letters* 53:3 (July 2000): 314–24. This pre-1934 poem is echoed by a third, datable to 1937, to which we will return.
4. From Brecht's *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, cited in Crick, 316:

Rat an die Schauspielerin C.N.

*Erfrische dich, Freundin
 An dem Wasser aus dem Kupferkessel mit den Eisstücken
 – Öffne die Augen unter dem Wasser, wasch sie –
 Trockne dich ab mit dem rauhen Tuch und lies
 Vom Blatt an der Wand die schwierigen Zeilen der Rolle.
 Wisse, das tust du für dich und tue es vorbildlich.*

The translation provided here adapts Willett's translation of a variant bearing the same title: Bertolt Brecht, *Poems, 1913-1956*, ed. John Willett (New York: Routledge, 1987), 179–180.

5. Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 106.
6. Benjamin, 'Conversations', 106.
7. *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi – Jen, Zand, Ajoï – Woman, Life, Freedom*
8. 'Zenān', <https://harasswatch.com/news/2049/>
9. 'Zenān'. Translated with assistance from Aras Amiri.
10. Two translations are available. I will cite the former. 'Figuring a Women's Revolution: Bodies Interacting with Their Images', Jadaliyya, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44479>

'Women Reflected in Their Own History', e-flux, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/497512/women-reflected-in-their-own-history>

11. This image and the following ones belong to a single series of paintings, which can be found at: <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/190443>.
12. Cigarette smoke renders teargas less caustic.
13. For this sentence, I have cited the e-flux translation.
14. After those she can invoke, she calls on the 'names I have yet to call'. These are not anonymous, either: they are names. Here, the present perfect opens onto the future: '... have yet to call'.
15. Translation modified; L, 'Zenān'. e-flux is right to give gender-neutral 'them', since Persian does not have gendered nouns or pronouns.
16. '1357 – azada jem'ea az zendanaan saasa az zendan qesr – aban', <https://www.aparat.com/v/c2Li8?t=90>
17. L, 'Figuring'. For Farsi interpolations, 'Zenān'.
18. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems, 1913-1956*, 290. German from Bertolt Brecht, *Gedichte 2*, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann, vol. 9, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), 1967.
19. When my friend, who teaches so much, was imprisoned five years ago, this poem became hers. She has since been released.
20. Reposted by BBC Persian, Sepideh Qoliyan's original post remains on her feed. sepide_qoliyan, Instagram, 15 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cpz7dfKvWZS/>
21. Zahhāk is a monster from ancient Persian mythology.)
22. 'Baraye Shervin Hajipour (Full Version with English Lyrics) – Baraye', Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY_U5QfeQQc
23. 'Shervin Hajipour – Baraye', *Genius.com*, [https://www.genius.com/Shervin-hajipour-baraye-lyrics-with-two-modifications-\(%27women%27-to-%27woman%27-and-%27men%27-to-%27man%27,-in-the-last-six-lines\)](https://www.genius.com/Shervin-hajipour-baraye-lyrics-with-two-modifications-(%27women%27-to-%27woman%27-and-%27men%27-to-%27man%27,-in-the-last-six-lines)).
24. Shervin Hajipour was released on bail. Sepideh Qoliyan is back in prison, sentenced to two more years. She is out of block 209 and back in the main ward. Next week will mark the one-year anniversary of Jina Amini's murder and of the beginning and first warmth of the movement. It will no doubt be commemorated. We know what promise the people of Iran have become. What will their morning bring? *September 2023 / Shahrivar 1402*