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# Political Wall Writing as Activism

*Mona Hedayati*

## **Abstract**

*Political Wall Writing as Activism* is a discussion on my new video-recorded performance, *Death to...* (2018), that explores the practice of wall writing, a rare manifestation of political dissent in Iran, in the absence of formal channels of democratic protest. In an effort to contextualize this practice, I will first situate it within its distinct historical background and analyze the dominant rhetoric surrounding it, then compare and contrast the coordinates of this type of activism versus the narrative I offer in the video, and finally discuss the shift from language to performativity, before positioning this discourse within its grand narrative.

**Keywords:** Activism, Censorship, Iran-US relations, Cultural Clash, Language Barrier

## **Artist's Statement**

*Death to...* is the video documentation of a performance which explores the role of political wall writing as a form of activism aiming for mass mobilization with a historical permanence in Iran. Political dissent, when formal channels of democratic protest are non-existent, has often resulted in anti-authoritative messages being transcribed on the walls over the past several decades. Hastily written by protesters and then carelessly erased by state agents, wall writing has a long archaeological presence in politically-unstable countries, particularly in the Middle East.

I focus on Iran as I layer these oppositional messages onto the wall, where such political messages often start with the phrase “death to,” followed by political ideology or affiliation. In so doing, I repeatedly occupy dual roles: of the protester writing these statements in Farsi, and then the state agent carelessly painting over them, allowing the layers underneath to show through without ever attempting to erase the phrase “death to,” highlighting the historical predominance of this rhetoric as a politicized extension of colloquial language. This form of activism problematizes citizen-state dynamics by foregrounding the role of the activist as a disruptor of power relations, thereby challenging the authority by claiming the wall as a tool of mass communication, highlighting its presence in the public sphere that is subject to this ongoing clash.

## Background

On multiple occasions during my recent archival research on Iran's political history, I came across photographs of ordinary people paid by the state to paint over wall writings in an effort to hide the original messages under the guise of "cleaning up" the city after protests.<sup>2</sup> That awakened a curiosity in me to know more about the history of this practice as I had a clear visual memory of the wall writings being everywhere in Tehran during my childhood.

More research revealed that this is a deeply-rooted form of political activism across the Middle East, particularly in Iran. Subsequently, I situated this practice broadly by looking into the geopolitics of the Middle East, considering that the persistent lack of freedom of speech is a symptom of totalitarianism, regardless of regime change. This drives masses to express themselves in ways, like political wall writing, because they don't have an open platform for protest. The role of foreign intervention in the region and its relation to wall writing was another factor to take into consideration, a manifestation of which is detected in the phrase: "Yankee Go Home," a staple in protests against the United States interventionism. There is a pattern that suggests the ongoing ominous infiltration of "enemy," that can be seen in the progression of wall writings as a by-product of foreign intervention: "death to warmongers, agitators and hypocrites" that appear in my work. This parallels the historical context that my work refers to. Given this background, I intended to point towards this practice as a complex form of activism highlighting the role of the wall, both as a medium of free expression and also as an agent that blurs the boundaries in the hierarchy of power between activist and state apparatus.

## "Death to" Rhetoric

Looking at the history of political wall writing as activism in Iran since the 1953 coup, one can immediately detect a recurrent manifestation of slogans starting with "death to" or "hail to."<sup>3</sup> Iranian sociologist Mehdi Mohseniain Rad's *In Pursuit of Proper Understanding* [به دنبال فهم درست] on the history of wall writing lists roughly 700 pre-revolutionary slogans.<sup>4</sup> This research shows that a considerable number of wall writings start with the phrase "death to" that stems from a peculiar place in Persian culture. Farsi is a language of bold exaggerations. In colloquial Farsi, we willingly wish death upon ourselves in saying "may god kill me" when we do something wrong, and we equally address the death wish to others with phrases such as "hope they bring the news of their death." This lingo also seeps into political defiance. During surges of regime change, wall writings starting with the phrase "death to" are often followed by the name of a specific party or affiliation; other times, it is addressed broadly towards an ideology removing historical boundaries. One can see, for instance, "death to imperialism, capitalism and colonialism" throughout the years and sometimes it is difficult to associate them with a specific era. "Death to America," a slogan that has been picked up and overemphasized by western media, falls into this ideological category as American imperialism and its representations

angered activists enough to put America next in the line-up after England, a popular “death to” slogan during the nationalization of the Anglo-Persian oil company.<sup>5</sup> Despite the common belief that the Islamic republic officially devised the term, its roots go further back to the American and British designed coup of 1953. However, the Islamic republic happened to highlight the rhetoric as part of their systematic propaganda in the media and integrated it into their state apparatus by organizing chanters to shout it out in the streets and commissioning massive murals on the public walls based on it. The rhetoric not only served the pre and post Islamic revolution ideologies but also proved its anti-establishment anarchist legacy under the reign of the Islamic Republic through slogans such as “death to the executioner,” referring to the 1988 mass killing of political prisoners and later on “death to the dictator” in response to presidential election fraud in 2009.<sup>6</sup>

### **Manipulating the Narrative**

Wall writings appear with a great sense of urgency and immediacy, often overnight. The intent of the anonymous activist is almost always a distinct hope for this practice to become contagious and galvanize masses, which does happen to serve its purpose at least during the bursts of unrest. One can notice how a few “death to” and “hail to” slogans immediately multiply into several hundreds in a matter of days, where ignoring them becomes an almost labourious task. Censorship attempts begin with police patrols or individual reports, followed by state agents going through neighbourhoods and painting over an abundance of slogans individually without meticulous care. That is how, a passer by can literally read what they just supposedly painted over as a peculiar ghost image of the original writing. Sometimes another message will appear on top of that whitewash immediately or with a delay which creates a layered discourse that, over time, loses its capacity to communicate messages embedded in deeper layers, gesturing towards the archeological quality of this practice.

In making *Death to...*, I allowed myself artistic freedom to modify actual circumstances on multiple levels. First, I chose to blur the lines and obscure the roles of activist versus state to foreground the wall writing practice. I was interested in performing this binary of writing and erasing to focus on the practice as a rivalrous, compulsive ritual between the activist and the state agent by concentrating on the act alone. I slowed down my pace of writing to highlight the role of the activist and extract the temporal presence of slogans by painting and writing over them immediately, thereby exaggerating the archeological aspect of the ghost imagery as a discourse that has been buried under layers of paint encapsulating intervals of protest and censorship. In such a circumstance, decoding these messages become almost impossible even for the reader of the Perso-Arabic alphabet, creating an indiscriminate language barrier.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the role of the wall is foregrounded as a living medium of mass communication and the only platform of free speech that goes through periods of consecutive tension between the activist and the authority, the claim to power and its reversal time after time throughout all these years.

### Neutrality of Language

Since I wrote in Farsi rather than English, most of the audience is unable to understand anything from the words, hence language becomes a material medium and that is how the shift from language to performativity happens. Bearing in mind that meaning is absent for a large portion of the audience, it is crucial to consider the distancing of language from its landscape of signification and its heavily politicized intent. This illegibility highlights the materiality and physicality of text as a purely formal element rather than a bearer of meaning.<sup>8</sup> In this case, there is a broken cycle between the signifier and signified. This break halts a viewer's attempt to decipher the meaning out of only text and instead makes them decode the event through the act and process. The focus here is no longer on interpreting the text, but in the manner the text is enacted. This level of obscurity brings out the performative as the main channel of interaction for the western viewer as the trap of semantics is absent, and the language barrier becomes the visual language.

### Conclusion

This video is an effort to foreground political wall writing as a precarious emancipatory practice that has been established as a creative response to the absolute absence of freedom of speech. Majorly showcased across the Western media platforms as an out-of-context radical insurgency against superpowers, this historical practice has been majorly discounted when fighting for causes such as social justice, civil rights and due process. By providing this crucial context for practices such as political wall writing, such platforms can familiarize Western audience with ongoing liberation movements happening across the Middle East, instances of which outnumber radical ideologies winning the utmost exposure.



*Death to...* (2018). Image courtesy of the author.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> I am truly indebted to organizers of Undisciplined who redefined the conventional divisions across disciplines and modes of art and cultural production and encouraged stepping beyond such boundaries by curating panels and screenings/performances that created new potentials and encouraged further dialogue.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth L. Rauh, “Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture, From the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1316–43; Lawrence Wu and Michelle Lanz, “How the CIA Overthrew Iran’s Democracy in 4 Days,” *National Public Radio*, February 7, 2019, <https://npr.org/2019/01/31/690363402/how-the-cia-overthrew-irans-democracy-in-four-days>.

<sup>3</sup> For information on 1953 Iranian Coup, see *New World Encyclopedia* entry at: [https://newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/1953\\_Iranian\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat#Planning\\_Operation\\_Ajax](https://newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/1953_Iranian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat#Planning_Operation_Ajax).

<sup>4</sup> Mehdi Mohseniain Rad, *In Pursuit of Proper Understanding*, [به دنبال فهم درست] (London: H&S Media, 2016), 82–140 (in Persian only).

<sup>5</sup> For information on Anglo-Persian Oil Company see *Encyclopedia Iranica* entry at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anglo-persian-oil-company>.

<sup>6</sup> Rauh, “Thirty Years Later,” 1316–43.

<sup>7</sup> If language is a form of coded signs that are supposed to be decoded to hold a signification, here, this process of layering hinders that mechanism to occur because of illegibility.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Walker, “Reading Materiality: The Literary Critical Treatment of Physical Texts,” *Renaissance Drama* 41, no. 1/2 (2013): 199–232. doi:10.1086/673904.