

Chapter 4

Autonomous Minds and Bodies in Theory and Practice: Women Constructing Cultural Identities and Becoming Visible through Art

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Introduction

Art education and art practice in Iran in the twenty-first century have become a front for demonstrating resistance and agency more than ever before. Taught at five universities in the capital and many more around the country, they facilitate critical voice and visibility for young women especially. This is in the public domain through exhibitions and in the private and intimate spheres for artistic experimentation (Honarbin-Holliday 2010: 140–70; 2008; 2007b: 22–4; 2007a: 6–7; 2005; 2004: 26–7). Art education is increasingly the intellectual and political project, the significant tool, adopted by many from the new generation of women in order to be present in the higher education system, to construct learner and artistic identities, to register ideas, and to reflect on individual and collective lived experiences. Cultural continuity and dialogue, relevant to the young women's locale under the patriarchal theocracy and their citizenship of the world, are hence accessed and maintained, positing new perspectives in learning and knowledge. The creative act and the language of art are thus adopted to expand real and imagined worlds beyond borders.

In this chapter I will draw on many years of fieldwork in Iran to examine the relationships between art and autonomy, disclosing key and illuminating data from a small cluster of art students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in Tehran. Implicit in the material are interrelated themes of being, belonging and becoming visible to self and other. In the age of reflexivity in academic research I shall extend the site of enquiry to reflect on my own studio work as a member of the Iranian diaspora. This will facilitate epistemic interrelationships between Tehran and Canterbury in the UK, illuminating the ways in which I draw on my cultural heritage and engage with ideas and materials to determine my own political location living in the West. The chapter thus illustrates Iranian women's ways of seeing, and their shared cultural knowledge, which not only facilitate

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