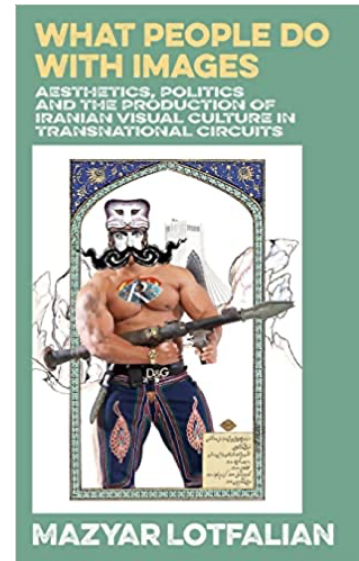


Mazyar Lotfalian, **What People do With Images: Aesthetics, Politics and the Production of Iranian Visual Culture in Transnational Circuits**, Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2022, 163 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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The 21st century has been marked by a burgeoning field of art production in convergence with new media technologies, in particular, the Internet, in which premonitions of the future have been registered by senses of a participatory, interactive, and creative agency. Somewhere between the local modes of experience, and the translocal sphere of commodities, where capitalism boasts of cultural vitality, 21st-century art thrives as a complex set of communication circuits across lived worlds that are by nature ambiguous, self-effacing, and in the making by users, who innovatively redefine boundaries and open spaces for new interpretations. Meanwhile, the contemporary world serves as a source in the practices of worlding, as artists, bloggers, curators, influencers, filmmakers, musicians, performers, and writers negotiate spaces of creative action, in which, as Miguel Sicart (2014) describes, materiality and praxis are joined together to provide spaces to be.



The shifting contours of such spaces of being are the primary focus of Mazyar Lotfalian's ***What People do With Images: Aesthetics, Politics and the Production of Iranian Visual Culture in Transnational Circuits***. Based on a number of ethnographic studies of Tehran since 2001, this is a book of original insight, examining ambivalent spaces of recirculation, rearticulation, renditions, and remakes of cultural objects that take shape in translocal settings. What ultimately is revealed in such settings is the possibility of new meaning(s) in the transformation of the public sphere. As subversive spaces, such new worlds are built by novel, playful world-makers. Iran is exemplary of a playground in the making.

What People do With Images is a meditation on what it means to make art a participatory experience. The key takeaway from this book is the concept of "meta-political," an alternative space of cultural practices where new meanings are created (pp. 36–37). Lotfalian notes that in an emergent interpretative milieu, cultural production and its complex communication practices undermine the boundaries between art and politics and that they also produce a distinct participatory set of practices, as stated by Henry Jenkins (2008), in convergence with new spreadable media. Equally inspired by W.J. t. Mitchell's (2005) notion of images as animated beings, the author further defines "meta-political" spaces as playful ways "people" (re)use, co-create, and remix visual objects to render different meanings that reframe images, thus making them social actors with significant political implications (pp. 36–37). All in all, Lotfalian's study of Iranians in Iran and the diaspora provides a case-study analysis of diverse mediated ways that a new public sphere of communication reflects the creative practices of alternative cultural productions.

Divided into eight chapters, including a conclusion, plus an informative appendix of Iranian artists discussed in the book, a foreword by leading architect and architectural historian, Pamela Karimi, and a preface by prominent anthropologist, Michel M. J. Fischer, *What People do With Images* is a trailblazer of innovative insights and ethnographic observations. More importantly, following Jacques Rancière's (2010) notion of "distribution of the sensible" (p. 36), *What People do With Images* is a new way of thinking of esthetics as political, which lends insight into how the social is formed.

Followed by the introduction, the first chapter sets up the book's anthropological approach to intersections of esthetics and politics. The second chapter draws attention to Iranians in Iran and the diaspora while focusing on the cinematic and multimedia production of the latter in the creative ways culture is appropriated by consumers as producers for something different. Though short in analysis, the chapter's take on four diasporic cinemas demonstrates how varied media have been appropriated by the Iranian diaspora across generations to configure alternative political spaces. The third chapter continues to expand on the meta-political sphere by focusing on curating practices of Islamic art. Viewed in the context of U.S.-Iran contentious relations since 1979, this chapter's ethnographic study of artists and art galleries, in particular in Dubai and Tehran, shows the emergent plural and innovative curatorial spaces of interaction that shape esthetics into novel spaces of meta-political importance.

In the fourth chapter, Lotfalian provides a unique account of the complex ways that autoethnography and visual culture overlap, enabling Iranian diasporic and Iran-based selves to insert personal narratives for new expressions of subjectivity. In this chapter, two of Reza Bahraminejad's films, *Flying Misters* and *Mr. Art* (2003 and 2005, respectively), are highlighted as intriguing case studies in inventive uses of documentary film as autoethnography. Bahraminejad's films provide us with innovative instances of how multiple selves emerge in translocal spaces where filmmakers perform and mediate new meanings about self and reality. Meanwhile, the fifth chapter shows how the dramatic Shi'i rituals of mourning, known as *ta'ziyeh*, performed in commemoration of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, in Karbala, Iraq, in 680 C.E., have transformed through new technologies of cultural production with remarkable political implications. Lotfalian references Walter Benjamin's (2008) notion of aura to rethink the performance of *ta'ziyeh* in transnational spaces of mediation such as the stage performance at the Lincoln Center, New York City, in 2002. The New York production reveals how a religious tradition such as the *ta'ziyeh* can be remade into a new esthetic presence for a wider audience. As the aura changes with technical reproducibility, new possible reconstructions of a religious practice transmute across the globe.

Chapters six and seven further explore the intricacy of esthetics politics and the politics of aesthetics. In these two chapters, Lotfalian shows how creative uses of Internet-based technologies enable activists to not only bypass state censorship regulations but also produce a unique cultural milieu to reinterpret traditions for newer, alternative conceptions of being in the world. Jenkins (2008) is a key theorist in this chapter, as Lotfalian examines various media convergence practices in the adaption, sharing, co-creating, and remixing of media in the empowerment of "people" in redefining politics. Chapter seven turns to the concept of the "underground" and argues that the Iranian underground culture exemplifies a distinct poetic space where art and politics intertwine through mystical forms of knowledge and being such as *khalvat* (solitude), *rendi* (slyness or creative detachment from convention), *zaher* (exoteric or outer), and *batan* (esoteric or inner). The rise of underground music in the 1990s and 2000s, Lotfalian argues,

identifies the formation of self-defining spaces of creative practice operational through the new technological spheres of connectivity.

There are, however, certain questions that the book neglects to address. What might the life of convergence media look like after "worlding with images" enters the global realm of market commodification? Can "worlding" be "peopled" while attached to socioeconomic and material infrastructures that, in many ways, standardize new technological communications? More specific to the Global South, what is the role of class in the "active agency" production of new esthetic spaces where new meanings are constructed? Could images be decoupled from subtle ways in which dominant class dynamics reflect local and transnational cultural processes?

The last question highlights the intricate relationship between culture and capital, a dynamic that could have been further explored in the book. Lotfalian, however, does provide some interesting observations on this relationship, especially about the Iranian diaspora communities through which symbolic capital in the form of philanthropic practices shapes class distinction. As a diasporic subject who formerly served as the assistant director of the Samuel Jordan Center at the University of California at Irvine, Lotfalian highlights the threats to academic freedom in light of symbolic capitalization in the form of financial support of the center by wealthy Iranian-Americans (p. 36). The primary issue with the agency of diasporic spaces is the entanglement of financial and symbolic capital with knowledge production, as the Samuel Jordan Center continues to essentially promote a primordial imaginary of Iran based on pre-Islamic history and, more importantly, amicable to the taste of mostly middle-class Iranian diaspora, who happen to fund the center. The 2018 hosting of the 12th Biennial Association of Iranian Studies Conference is another example of a transnational academic meeting morphed into a cultural event of nationalist flare. The meta-political is politics by other means.

Lotfalian merits praise for producing original work that contains self-reflective observations and autoethnographic insights. This book is an example of the very worlding practices that he discusses in his book, in terms of creative mediations between different political spheres. *What People do With Images* is an enormously valuable contribution to how we could think about esthetics and what it is possible to do with art as politics while being mindful of the limits of present possibilities.

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