



A COLLECTIVE BODY

by Tina Kukielski

“We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.”

—Wallace Stevens, excerpt from “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

The life and work of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian represent a radical redefinition of the collective. Since 2009, the trio have transformed a nondescript villa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, into a wondrous world for collaborative living and working: a utopia of self-sustaining creative life.

Much like the kitschy, dense, and spirited universe in which they cohabit, the imaginative realms they construct collectively as both artworks and delirious exhibitions draw on improvisational collage, assemblage and figurative painting. By casting themselves and a select group of friends as actor-protagonists in video and photo-based works, they demonstrate a buffooning and whimsical approach to exhibition-cum-theatre. Taken in combination, these strategies attest to a bewitching collective unconscious that is the crux of this joyous collaboration.

Brothers Ramin and Rokni first met Hesam in the mid-1990s, and they bonded over a shared enthusiasm for VHS tapes – containing snippets of MTV and VIVA Polska – that were illegally distributed around Tehran at that time. Their paths diverged momentarily as the three young men found their own circuitous path to art, navigating a culture bound up by the conservatism of an Islamic Republic, until they reunited in the newfound refuge of Dubai.

Though their individual artistic practices differ stylistically, consistent across the work of all three is hilarious, unyielding satire. Rahmanian studied calligraphy and fine art in Tehran and continued to pursue the latter at university in the United States. In his moody yet crisp paintings, surfaces of thick paint convey tragicomic scenes, from isolated, mundane interactions like crossing the street to more overt confrontations like a boxing match or bullfight. Rokni Haerizadeh, whose hand is more wild than the gentle and refined Rahmanian, mines the traditions of Persian literature and painting, both of which he studied in Tehran. Subverting this education in the classics, he

revamps scenes of newsworthy disasters, wars, or protests, like those recently staged by the radical feminist group Femen, retelling them as twisted, dark, and humorous allegories of human-beast metamorphosis. The work of Ramin Haerizadeh, the eldest of the trio and the most digitally-savvy, merges photo-based self-portraiture with appropriated materials that often erupt from the canvas into the surrounding space. Turning collage into assemblage, Haerizadeh thereby refigures his body-based compositions into an image-stew of gender-bending satire.

The trio's collective vocabulary is grounded in a mutual, self-taught education in Persian poetry, British music, American art, and cinema from Japan, Russia, France and Iran. These influences are no longer shared via contraband VHS but are instead sought out online, in mail-order books and through occasional travel (though rarely does one travel without his companions). They pool these influences, and meld them to the figurative and theatrical traditions from Iran that are ingrained in their psyches. Yet to dissect the references in these works is to hamper an overall understanding of their transgressive message. This intermingling of allusions, styles and aesthetic forms is better understood as pastiche: The sediment of source material makes its particulars subservient to the whole. The approach here is not dead, neutral "blank parody", as Fredric Jameson once defined pastiche.¹ Rather, pastiche mobilises satire and subversion in the interest of challenging norms about what art can be, and how to live as artists bound between public and private, religious and secular worlds.

Up North

The seeds of the trio's collective revolution were sown as early as 2002. Back then, it was common for Tehran's artists to gather once a year in and around the rural mountain village of Polur, Iran, for an environmental art festival. Participants crafted sculptures from flowers or rocks, and hung works made from natural materials in and among the hills and trees. Occasionally, something was set alight, but otherwise the event tended to be rather tame. For the 2002 edition of the festival, Ramin and Rokni Haerizaedeh, along with a small group of fellow artists and friends, had driven up from Tehran for the festivities. Bored by the limitations of the sanctioned interventions, the group, altogether spontaneously, began to collect the trash left behind by the other participants: discarded flora or bamboo, and strewn plastic bags that once held artists' projects. Eventually, this irreverent faction began to load up the flotsam

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from the surrounding village also, bundling their findings together on long sticks and looking like vagabonds on their way to the next pit-stop. Soon a small crowd assembled and the local residents began to join the makeshift procession, helping to gather the refuse, not knowing the purpose of the absurd exercise but improvising on it nonetheless.

The audiences amassed in Polur for the festival neglected to notice this disruption. It served only as a minor incident, a spontaneous action without fanfare; a kind of *dérive* in the Situationist sense. But that day up in Polur also had echoes of a boisterous yet serious *Ta'ziyeh*, a dramatic tradition still popular in Iran. A form of passion play, recounting the martyrdom of Husayn (grandson of the prophet Mohammed), *Ta'ziyeh* makes use of various vernacular art forms such as procession and pageantry, and is improvised on the street by male actors. The real artistry of *Ta'ziyeh*, however, is in its bricolage costume-making and set design. The form has been described as a disposable sacred art because of the commonplace materials used such as found wood and bamboo for the stage set and frame, tin foil, mica and glass for ornamentation. Costumes are colourful and enhance the fluid dynamic between actors and audience; the spectators are surrounded by and often drawn into the physical action of the play. This union of piousness, participation and pageantry makes *Ta'ziyeh* a forbear of that spontaneous performative clean-up in Polur, as well as the spirit of pastiche and improvisation in the recent collaboration of the three artists.

Body Talk

Across the trio's diverse and copious production – whether completed collaboratively or as individual artists – the most prominent and recurring subject is the body. Through collage, sculpture, painting and video, a myriad of bodily representations arise: men morph into zebras, faux-antique jars become bawdy bottom-heavy tourists, arabesques anthropomorphise into hair, eyes and mouth, beautiful women turn selfish, violent criminals, and grandmothers transform into garden caryatids. As such, the body is manifest at points along a broad spectrum, from animal to human, male to female, young to old, good to evil, thereby giving credence to theorist Judith Butler's redefinition of the body as a "variable boundary." Here, the culturally-constructed body is made suspect and challenged through its performance and activation as "a region of cultural unruliness and disorder."² The chaos and untidiness we find in the trio's collaborative works, therefore, equates to the obfuscation and variability of

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several things at once: body image, object relation, and the performance of gender. With that comes a wellspring of implied eroticism as subtext.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the various couplings and sexual personas parodied in *Joyous Treatise* (pages 24 – 33), an ongoing series of collages that pastiche Persian illuminated manuscripts and miniature paintings. *Risala-i-Dilqusha* (*Joyous Treatise*), by the poet and satirist Ubayd-i Zakani, is a fourteenth-century book of vignettes about romantic and carnal love, each deployed as social commentary. Comparable to Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, the manuscript is remarkable for its humour and frankness about sexual and social mores of the day. Written in both Arabic and Farsi, it was illustrated over and over again as the book circulated around the region, despite on-and-off censorship due to its salacious subject matter.³

Figurative art as storytelling occupies a long history in Iranian art and this provides an endless source of inspiration for the trio. In their updated version of the *Joyous Treatise*, the parts of husband, wife, lover, cheater, mistress, mother, and father are acted out by the artists and their friends. Photographed and then glued into collaged pages, surrounded by Arabic and Farsi calligraphy by Iman Raad, the figures are later altered and illuminated again with costume, colourful patterning and small glimpses of anthropomorphism. One such collage shows a scene of a husband and his pregnant wife, both equally bulbous, equally feminine, and both incidentally played by Ramin Haerizadeh (page 29). Its accompanying text refers to Zakani's original: "While Muzabbid's wife was pregnant, she looked at his face and said, 'Woe to me if what is in my belly should look like you.' 'Woe to you if it should not!' he replied." As performative satire, these works meld humour with a brew of eroticism that can only be defined as multivalent. These embellished pages are a crystallisation or mirroring of the trio's domestic life; playing dress-up and acting-out parts with each other and friends in their shared home. These already evocative stories of heterosexual or homosexual love are made even more kinky and weird via this collaborative retelling.

Fetish 1 and *Fetish 2* (pages 18 and 20) are two long scroll-like collages that erode the boundaries of the body even further. They depict a pair of animal-ballerina statues – one is upright, the other upside down, both are equally ghastly. The medusa-like head in *Fetish 1* is composed of photographs of shells and a disembodied, hairy upper torso. This figure balances atop a patterned box with its legs spread just enough to give birth to a giant fish from its bloodied centre. *Fetish 2*, dons a tutu and dancing shoes while balancing upside down on a painted sword. Again, its head is a cropped torso surrounded

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by creeping tendrils of finely-painted white hair. These collages arise from cut-up photographs of various body parts – some belonging to the artists, others to a cast of sitters – that have been reassembled to build a monumental androgynous figure, a paper doll, an exquisite corpse. Whether these works are seen as abject surrogates to be lauded, or composite gods to be appeased, the scale of the works alone demands attention. That they depict gender-bending, human-beast hybrids only bolsters their effect as symbols of the corporeal blurring of the trio.

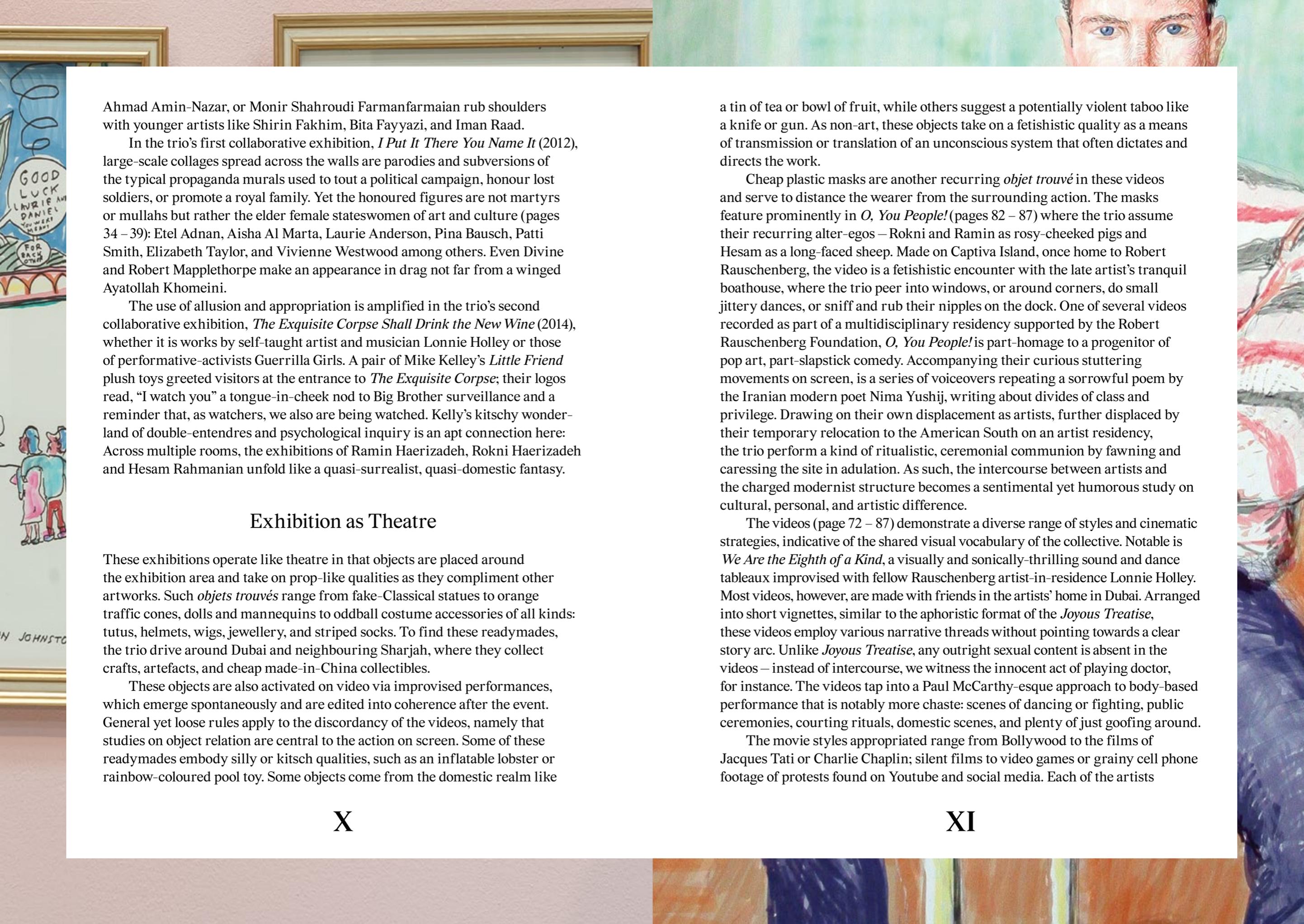
Exhibition as Allusion

Take any installation by these artists and pervasive throughout is a mood that transcends the body-subject addressed above. This sentiment abounds largely due to a painted, patterned floor that unites sprawling exhibition rooms like a mirage. A cascade of black and white triangles invites the viewer to enter, but the patterns quickly become inconsistent and scatter into a sea of painted red poppies. Geometric outcroppings, evocative of arabesques, blend and morph into a screaming giant's head with a swirling shock of blue hair. Like entering *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, intimations of retreat and contemplation reverberate with moments of mystery and intrigue.

Such sensory and visual discord is a frequent tactic in these exhibitions, as is the inclusion of artworks by other artists. In an approach similar to Rosemarie Trockel in her exhibition-as-*Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities), where the artist intermingles her work with that of other artists, the trio align their work through object juxtaposition by including the work of artists they admire. This has created a pantheon of artistic allusions embedded in their otherwise difficult-to-characterise approach to exhibition-making.

This self-made canon ranges from eighteenth century satirical lithographs by Thomas Rowlandson to reproductions of Francisco Goya's dark social commentaries. Oddball cartoons by musician and artist Daniel Johnston sit alongside drawings by the quick-witted Iranian satirist Ardeshir Mohasses. Figurative paintings by Nicole Eisenman, David Hockney, Tala Madani and Abel Auer also feature, as do drawings by Mona Hatoum and Louise Bourgeois. A large sculptural work built from cheap plastic sandals by Hassan Sharif, a pioneer of conceptual art in the United Arab Emirates, becomes a prop in the performative *Foolad* (pages 78 – 79), a video work filmed in the artists' Dubai home. Iranian art figures prominently as well, and modernists like Bahman Mohasses,

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Ahmad Amin-Nazar, or Monir Shahroudi Farmanfarmaian rub shoulders with younger artists like Shirin Fakhim, Bitā Fayyazi, and Iman Raad.

In the trio's first collaborative exhibition, *I Put It There You Name It* (2012), large-scale collages spread across the walls are parodies and subversions of the typical propaganda murals used to tout a political campaign, honour lost soldiers, or promote a royal family. Yet the honoured figures are not martyrs or mullahs but rather the elder female stateswomen of art and culture (pages 34 – 39): Etel Adnan, Aisha Al Marta, Laurie Anderson, Pina Bausch, Patti Smith, Elizabeth Taylor, and Vivienne Westwood among others. Even Divine and Robert Mapplethorpe make an appearance in drag not far from a winged Ayatollah Khomeini.

The use of allusion and appropriation is amplified in the trio's second collaborative exhibition, *The Exquisite Corpse Shall Drink the New Wine* (2014), whether it is works by self-taught artist and musician Lonnie Holley or those of performative-activists Guerrilla Girls. A pair of Mike Kelley's *Little Friend* plush toys greeted visitors at the entrance to *The Exquisite Corpse*; their logos read, "I watch you" a tongue-in-cheek nod to Big Brother surveillance and a reminder that, as watchers, we also are being watched. Kelly's kitschy wonderland of double-entendres and psychological inquiry is an apt connection here: Across multiple rooms, the exhibitions of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmaniān unfold like a quasi-surrealist, quasi-domestic fantasy.

Exhibition as Theatre

These exhibitions operate like theatre in that objects are placed around the exhibition area and take on prop-like qualities as they compliment other artworks. Such *objets trouvés* range from fake-Classical statues to orange traffic cones, dolls and mannequins to oddball costume accessories of all kinds: tutus, helmets, wigs, jewellery, and striped socks. To find these readymades, the trio drive around Dubai and neighbouring Sharjah, where they collect crafts, artefacts, and cheap made-in-China collectibles.

These objects are also activated on video via improvised performances, which emerge spontaneously and are edited into coherence after the event. General yet loose rules apply to the discordancy of the videos, namely that studies on object relation are central to the action on screen. Some of these readymades embody silly or kitsch qualities, such as an inflatable lobster or rainbow-coloured pool toy. Some objects come from the domestic realm like

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a tin of tea or bowl of fruit, while others suggest a potentially violent taboo like a knife or gun. As non-art, these objects take on a fetishistic quality as a means of transmission or translation of an unconscious system that often dictates and directs the work.

Cheap plastic masks are another recurring *objet trouvé* in these videos and serve to distance the wearer from the surrounding action. The masks feature prominently in *O, You People!* (pages 82 – 87) where the trio assume their recurring alter-egos – Rokni and Ramin as rosy-cheeked pigs and Hesam as a long-faced sheep. Made on Captiva Island, once home to Robert Rauschenberg, the video is a fetishistic encounter with the late artist's tranquil boathouse, where the trio peer into windows, or around corners, do small jittery dances, or sniff and rub their nipples on the dock. One of several videos recorded as part of a multidisciplinary residency supported by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, *O, You People!* is part-homage to a progenitor of pop art, part-slapstick comedy. Accompanying their curious stuttering movements on screen, is a series of voiceovers repeating a sorrowful poem by the Iranian modern poet Nima Yushij, writing about divides of class and privilege. Drawing on their own displacement as artists, further displaced by their temporary relocation to the American South on an artist residency, the trio perform a kind of ritualistic, ceremonial communion by fawning and caressing the site in adulation. As such, the intercourse between artists and the charged modernist structure becomes a sentimental yet humorous study on cultural, personal, and artistic difference.

The videos (page 72 – 87) demonstrate a diverse range of styles and cinematic strategies, indicative of the shared visual vocabulary of the collective. Notable is *We Are the Eighth of a Kind*, a visually and sonically-thrilling sound and dance tableaux improvised with fellow Rauschenberg artist-in-residence Lonnie Holley. Most videos, however, are made with friends in the artists' home in Dubai. Arranged into short vignettes, similar to the aphoristic format of the *Joyous Treatise*, these videos employ various narrative threads without pointing towards a clear story arc. Unlike *Joyous Treatise*, any outright sexual content is absent in the videos – instead of intercourse, we witness the innocent act of playing doctor, for instance. The videos tap into a Paul McCarthy-esque approach to body-based performance that is notably more chaste: scenes of dancing or fighting, public ceremonies, courting rituals, domestic scenes, and plenty of just goofing around.

The movie styles appropriated range from Bollywood to the films of Jacques Tati or Charlie Chaplin; silent films to video games or grainy cell phone footage of protests found on Youtube and social media. Each of the artists

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appear frequently in their own videos, alongside a rotating cast of collaborators, friends, actors and musicians. Bodies appear and disappear, they dance or make trance-like motions that border on giddiness. The body as “variable boundary” again plays out here through intentionally bad stereotypes performed for the camera: the butcher, the film star, the maid, the doctor, the drag queen – a subtle reminder that Butler’s gendered body is inherently performative. That these exaggerated actions and stock characters translate across different cultures is one reason they frequently recur as motifs. As a vehicle for satire, such simple and recognisable characterisations leave the door open for interpretation by the broadest possible audience.

The spirit of spontaneity and overall design embodied in the shared enterprise of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmadian takes lessons from sources far and wide, East and West, theatre and art. Their collaboration weds these influences to an improvisational intuition that is fluent in various media and comfortable moving between private and public realms. At their most essential, the works challenge how and what can be termed art: equal parts do-it-yourself artistry, free-wheeling impersonation, action and non-action. The collective tries things the wrong way around, they make use of the useless and, in that way, cast light on subjects in the margins. This collaborative, day-to-day practice, then, is its own form of disposable sacred art, its own *Ta’ziyeh*. “Embracing what is considered marginal, wasted, wrong, messed-up, useless and the taken for granted, this becomes a stimulus for something we call an achievement,” they write in a shared statement. And what an achievement it is – a union of heart, mind and soul in the interest of collective transformation.

1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991); 19.

2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); 177-178.

3 *Joyous Treatise* became popular in the 14th century during the Timurid Empire, a period notable in the history of Islamic art and culture due to its ruler Timur’s policy of transporting and consolidating artists and craftspeople from across conquered lands to the capital in Samarkand and later Herat, resulting in great patronage and production for the arts.

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Still from *We Are The Eighth of a Kind*, 2014, featuring Lonnie Holley



Installation view, *I Put It There You Name It*, 2012

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