Sheida Soleimani, Cyborg: Photomontage in an Expanding Network

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This article examines the photomontages, photo-sculptures, installations, and videos of contemporary artist Sheida Soleimani in light of earlier Dadaist practices. In particular, it focuses on similarities and differences between Soleimani’s work and that of Dada artists John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, demonstrating how Soleimani has evolved Dada photomontage and performance strategies in novel and important ways. Soleimani’s development of earlier avant-garde strategies with the help of digital technologies, I argue, proves the continuing relevance of photomontage today. In addition, it also reveals Soleimani’s interest in combining a Dadaist approach to photography, which—through photomontage—emphasizes the artist’s position as a social critic and commentator on reality, with a Surrealist attitude, one that mobilizes the indexical aspects of the photograph to disclose the uncanny and mysterious aspects of the world.

Keywords: Sheida Soleimani (b. 1990), digital photography, rephotography, contemporary art, women, Iran

In response to the question of whether photomontage is over, current practices suggest quite the contrary: photomontage remains a vital strategy, one that exists within an expanding network of audio-visual creation. Contemporary artist Sheida Soleimani is a case in point. Like the artists of the historical avant-garde, she makes political art: creative work that criticizes the existing social and political order while simultaneously imagining new forms of identity better suited to life in a rapidly changing and still globalizing world. Even more than the Dadaists and Surrealists, however, Soleimani—a beneficiary of the rapid growth of mass communication technologies that facilitate intermediality—reveals herself to be engaged in complex cross-media dialogues in which photography, video, sculpture, installation, performance, and the Internet are combined across series of works. As I argue, it is Soleimani’s intermediality that enables her to update and advance avant-garde photomontage and to create powerful political artworks that amplify the presence and impact of the interwar strategy by, in particular, developing its three-dimensional (sculptural-tactile) and four-dimensional (time-based and performative) qualities.

Like that of many young artists today (she will turn thirty in 2020), Soleimani’s practice is disruptive and unruly—she employs strategies of appropriation and montage to contest sexism, racism, and militarism, while affirming hybrid subject positions through her treatment of the human body, and through her construction of complex multifigure tableaus that situate people outside traditional categories of gender, race, and national origin. In many ways, Soleimani can be considered...
Matthew Biro

a subaltern cyborg. A subaltern because she deals with legacies of colonialism from an anti-colonialist perspective. A cyborg because Soleimani embraces the strategies and technologies of the mass media as extensions of her body and her mind.1 She is also a feminist in the sense that a strong critique of patriarchy pervades her work. However, it is because of her development of the early-twentieth century strategy of cut-and-paste photomontage that she is of most interest to us here today.

As contemporary artist Charlie White has argued, the dominant digital culture of today emerges in fundamental ways from the modernist collage culture that existed before World War II. But even if collage, at the present moment, is ‘a natural impulse for all media’, and ‘a common response to the layers of information that burden us’, it is incorrect to argue, as White does, that montage waned and then waxed again during the post-World War II period.2 To the contrary, the growth of montage over the past century continues to expand exponentially. As both artists and cultural producers of all kinds have grasped, it is the central principle through which to combine all other media around the visual, a fundamental historical task that continues to occupy the present moment. The same dialectical circuits – between art and advertising as well as between political critique and mass propaganda – run through both. And both periods of montage culture, as White suggests, have been part of a greater and more general deskilling of visual representation, of making image production and distribution easier for non-trained or ‘amateur’ cultural producers. As a result, we find ourselves enmeshed today within an expanding network of strategies, technologies, and institutions that make the distinction between producer and consumer seem almost obsolete, thereby vastly expanding the apparent project of political avant-garde montage between the wars. This opens up new possibilities but also new traps, and when it comes to politics, we are both more powerful and more vulnerable – an issue that Soleimani engages in her work.

Born in the USA, in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1990, Soleimani is the child of refugees who fled persecution in the Islamic Republic in the early and mid-1980s. She grew up in the American Mid-West hearing stories about her parent’s experiences living under the Shah and Ayatollah regimes: after the Islamic Revolution, her father, a doctor, had to go into hiding for three years and her mother, a nurse, was imprisoned and tortured.3 As Soleimani related,

My parents are both political refugees from Iran. They escaped from the revolution at different times – my dad left in 1983 and my mum in 1986. My dad was a political activist, distributing anti-governmental material, and, because of this, the government was basically trying to kill him. He went into hiding for three years, and eventually escaped over the border on horse-back. Subsequently, even though my mother wasn’t political at all, she was imprisoned, violated and tortured, as punishment for being with my father. She eventually got out of prison and escaped the country.4

In her first major body of photomontage work, the series National Anthem, constructed between 2014 and 2016, and begun while she was still in graduate school at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the artist engaged with this legacy, making allegorical photographs of Iran, a country she had never visited in person. Broken representations of an imagined country in which graphic violence intermixes with vivid sensuality, these ‘rephotographed’ photo-collage and object environments both embraced and transformed the (pre-digital) avant-garde strategy of photomontage through technologies and techniques drawn from contemporary commercial and digital photography.5 In particular, as we shall see, rephotography makes the cuts and sutures of the photomontage technique less immediately apparent and jarring – a fact of which the later Heartfield was also well aware. In Soleimani’s artworks, rephotography reminds us of how quickly radical media techniques become assimilated by the culture industry as well as of the fact that this assimilation can lead to new possibilities for radical practice. By making the fantastic assemblages of photographic fragments more real – more physically cohesive and ‘present’, as it were – rephotography can make photomontage more

1 – As Antonio Gramsci argues, the subaltern classes are defined in relation to dominant or hegemonic groups (governmental as well as corporate bodies) to which they stand in a subordinate relationship of power. As a result, the subaltern always reveals a relationship to dominant political, economic, and social powers, either as accommodation or resistance. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers 1971, 52.


shocking and subversive again, at least, with the ‘right’ juxtapositions and in the ‘correct’ context, as Soleimani’s work shows so well.

To make her National Anthem, Soleimani printed out images sourced from the Internet – politicians, religious figures, soldiers, prisoners, executioners, and ordinary people, as well as Persian rugs and other patterned forms – that she then combined with three-dimensional objects, both natural and man-made. The resulting dioramas, or table-top sculptures, in which appropriated images were mixed with raw and processed foods, toys, pebbles, plants, hair, wigs, sugar cubes, and fabrics, were carefully lit and then rephotographed with a high-resolution medium-format digital camera. The images that emerged, whose constituent parts signified Iran in a variety of different discursive registers, suggested twisted propaganda posters or surreal product displays, images that merged two-dimensional and three-dimensional space in powerful and confounding ways.

In Lachrymatory Agent, 2014 (figure 1), Soleimani placed cut-out photographic eyes within a larger configuration of three-dimensional objects, which include hand grenades, onions, and Coca Cola bottles, both broken and whole. Evoking the Arab world...
uprisings that erupted in late 2010 – onions and Coca Cola were street remedies for tear gas – as well as the self-reflexive (and sometimes upside down) eyeball iconography of Dada artists like Hannah Höch, the image implies both martyrdom and consumption. It suggests a wounded or executed body, but also the hyper-detailed and saturated aesthetics of contemporary advertising and food photography. As a result of these contradictions, the image promotes reflexivity about the photographic medium as well as questions about its effects on the body. Because of the formal similarities between the flat eyeballs and the volumetric objects, our awareness of the play between two and three dimensions is intensified; photography, the image thereby reminds us, preserves the body, but it can also freeze and kill it. Also, within this suggested horizon of meaning, montage itself appears suspect. In cinema, for example, montage brings still images to life; but, as Dada art has demonstrated, montage can also stand as a sign of dismemberment and trauma – a stand in for acts of torture and violence as well as processes of commemoration.7 By drawing upon this long history of montage, Soleimani’s photograph prompts us to question our place in media history – how, it motivates us to ask, have we arrived at this exceedingly complex state of affairs?

Nedā, 2014 (figure 2), on the other hand, does not abstractly replicate violence like Lachrymatory Agent, which perhaps conjures but never directly represents the violence that Soleimani’s mother experienced during her imprisonment. Instead, the predominantly grey, pink, and green photomontage focuses on a specific historical personage by reconfiguring the dying visage of Nedā Āgha-Soltān, the twenty-six-year-old philosophy student murdered by the Iranian Basij paramilitary during protests against the reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. Compiling different screen grabs of the dying woman appropriated from a viral YouTube video, the photograph also contains objects with symbolic connotations: sugar cubes, which in Iran are sometimes used to calm animals before slaughter; a toy ladder covered with blistered and peeling paint, which could signify ascension but also recalls images of public hangings; and a wilting hyacinth, a flower traditionally used in the Persian Nowruz celebration to represent the coming of spring. By suggesting both death and transcendence in the Internet era, Nedā conveys the power of the media to support domination as well as revolution. It also reminds us of the long history of martyr images within the medium of photomontage, as in, for example, the work of Heartfield, who, like Soleimani, appropriated images of dead people – both known and unknown victims – in order to suggest historical loss and violence.

Soleimani’s photomontage, however, also distinguishes itself from its Berlin Dada forebears. This can be seen, first of all, in the greater tension that Soleimani creates between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms in comparison to the work of the Germans. Through a combination of analogue and digital means that allow her to imaginatively mix photomontage, assemblage, and rephotography, Soleimani’s photomontages create more of a push–pull effect, a more pronounced interplay between the flattening and expansion of pictorial space than those of the Dadaists. In addition, her work is also more visceral and grotesque. With its juxtaposition of artificial, garish colour with grey, dying flesh, as well as its gory and unsettling iconography, Nedā makes the Dada photomontages of Höch, and even Heartfield, seem less shocking in comparison. Paired frog legs, which emerge from the severed neck openings of two of Nedā’s visages and which are also positioned on a rock in front of the pink ladder, underscore this distinction. Evoking a person’s naked, possibly flayed lower limbs in both spread and crossed positions as well as uncooked food, these elements simultaneously evoke both sexuality and consumption. Ambiguous and unsettling, they potentially remind the spectator of the increase in sexual assaults that occurs during times of war and revolution as well as the gender-based violence that many Iranian women suffer while imprisoned by the state. The explicitness with which she conflates sex, violence, and the pleasure of consumption is something that distinguishes Soleimani, and, paradoxically, a characteristic that gives her representations their undeniable political bite and resonance.

In other *National Anthem* photographs, the faces of dictators and religious leaders are altered with animal parts, food, and candles; and abstract fabric patterns are merged with the bodies of torture victims. Mixing beauty with horror, they are focused on human rights violations, while at the same time employing sensuous colour, detailed surface, and an appreciation of sophisticated graphic design. As Soleimani developed her photomontage practice in the *National Anthem* series, it became more volumetric and tactile, and she began to focus more and more on female victims of religious and political violence. In *Vitriolic Acid: An Eye for an Eye*, 2015 (figure 3), we are presented with another uncanny hybrid of portraiture and still life: a photomontage environment in which are configured grapes, eyes, and the fragmented face of an acid-attack victim that Soleimani discovered on the Internet. Once again, the violence of photomontage is harnessed in service of social and political critique, as the horror of an acid attack is emphasised by the traumatic connotations that are part of the formal history of photomontage as an avant-garde technique. As was the case with Dada photomontage, the cut-and-paste photographic fragment is mobilised to express the artist’s bitter criticism of a horrifying form of attack, one that is often directed at women. In certain ways,
Soleimani hyperbolises the (critical) strategy of Dada montage; but, in addition, there is a recuperative impulse. While it is true that photomontage is here used to attack the status quo, it is also employed to trigger historical recovery and engagement with both personal and collective history. Sourcing images on the World Wide Web, for the artist, was part of a larger process of gathering information and of doing research; it was a practice that allowed Soleimani to get in touch with her specific family history while also respecting the documentary function of the photographic medium as well as the documentary photographer’s responsibility to register and describe atrocities.8

Soleimani’s research on Iran, gender, and human rights led to a new series of works, To Oblivion, which focused on murdered women and the images that circulated of them in the wake of their disappearances. As she recalled,

Because my mother went through what she did, after I finished National Anthem, I started to think about a series that focused specifically on women. In Iran, human rights abuses happen mostly to women, although homosexuality, adultery and not being religious are also grounds for some type of torture to be

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inflicted. Instead of telling a story just about my mother, I wanted to talk about all the women in the country who are undocumented and who don’t get their stories told, because the government tries to make them disappear, by not putting out news or information about their executions.

To make this series, Soleimani sourced images of violated and murdered Iranian women from the open Web, Amnesty International, and Iran Human Rights Watch, individuals whose visages she transformed into frightening photomontage memorials. Collecting images made her aware that her first collation of images was only the tip of the iceberg. Because of Iran’s censorship of the Internet, she had to go beyond the visages and bodies she could easily find, employing the Dark Web to contact the families of ‘disappeared women’, individuals killed by the Iranian government and court system, often to cover up men’s crimes.

These women have all been convicted by sharia law, mostly for drug possession or adultery, but none of their trials is fair. There is a single sharia judge, a religious judge, who makes all the decisions. The women aren’t allowed to have lawyers, the process isn’t opened up to the media, and often the women have become the target of blame as a way to cover up the crime of a man. One of my first communications was with the mother of a woman whose daughter was executed for killing a man who was trying to rape her. As she lives in Iran I don’t want to name her, but that should give you some idea of how biased the system is.9

Locating a digital community of people dedicated to preserving their murdered loved ones’ images, Soleimani engaged this collective by asking for pictures to memorialise.

I spoke to my friends in Iran, and they told me that, because the government completely regulates the internet, a lot of people there have dark-web servers as a way to get information to outside sources. I have a friend in the US who set up a server for me. I started to communicate with people through my family members or friends who knew what was going on, as well as through Amnesty International and various lawyers. Some of the images I use in my work are sent by the victim’s family members. I have also used images I found on Google, but this only happens occasionally, when a trial has been covered by Amnesty International or other human rights groups. Amnesty covers maybe nine such cases each year, but after speaking with human rights lawyers in Iran, I know that, every year, at least 100 women are executed.10

Soleimani’s memorials took the form of sculptural photomontages – works like Atefeh, 2016 (figure 4), Shahla, 2016, and Zahrira, 2016 – stuffed and sewn cotton shapes, on which the photographic visages of disappeared women were pigment printed.11 She also made flat photographs with these subjects, employing the more two-dimensional photomontage technique from her National Anthem series. Engaging with the thematic of what Hito Steyerl called the ‘poor image’,12 images as records of missing or dead persons, both the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional works that Soleimani created were memorialising. But even more than the flat images, Soleimani’s photomontage soft sculptures seem like endeavours to recapture or restore the existences that were lost. They suggest attempts to give flattened pixelated images new life, to expand them and give them breath and animation. By memorialising surrogates for her mother, Soleimani commemorates lives unjustly lost, while approaching a ‘homeland’ that she probably will never visit in person.

It is perhaps this distance that exists between Soleimani and the country from which her parents came that motivates the insistent tactility and physicality of her photomontages. Because of the vehemence and intensity of her social and political criticisms, the artist is unable to ever visit Iran; after her work became known, she received countless threats from the country via Facebook and email. Possibly for this reason, Soleimani attempts to make the absent site of her ‘origins’ as real and material as she can. How does one summon an absent site or location – an abstraction of a homeland that one has never visited in person – when all one possesses are texts and images, abstract representations of the real? The haptic


10 - Ibid.

the tactile, Soleimani’s work suggests, may be one solution, a strategy of recuperation that allow her to approach a fundamental absence that structures her art.

Soleimani’s engagement with her personal history, on the other hand, occludes neither the political nor the artistic and self-reflexive in her work. The soft-sculpture memorials distort the women, giving them large heads and tiny bodies that make them appear childlike and slightly monstrous. Without sound or movement, they recall some of Tony Oursler’s video sculptures and installations of the 1990s, works like Crash, 1994, Horrerotica, 1994, Judy, 1994, Revelation, 1996, and Man She She, 1997.¹³ And they are – as is Oursler’s work – cartoonish and even comic, albeit to a lesser degree than the Los Angeles artist. There are other similarities as well. As T. J. Clark has argued, some of Oursler’s chattering head projections – and he is thinking here of The Influence Machine, 2002, a ranting visage projected on water vapour – put pressure on the underlying tenets of postmodernity, including the idea that all lines of demarcation that separate art from other forms of cultural production have been lost. As Clark argues, the rise of postmodernity also fundamentally implies the dominance of virtuality over materiality and

Figure 4. Sheida Soleimani, Atefeh, archival pigment print on cotton, paracord, dimensions variable, 2016. © 2019 Sheida Soleimani. Photograph by Will Amlot. Courtesy Edel Assanti.

the ascendancy of visuality over language. Without necessary affirming the distinction between modernism and postmodern – a binary that I do not find particularly useful today – Clark’s interpretation of Oursler holds merit, and helps to illuminate additional aspects of Soleimani’s achievement as well. In a different way, with their powerful emphasis on materiality and presence, Soleimani’s works also push back against the virtual, suggesting that despite the power of the concept of the real as pure information, the physical world also remains an important touchstone for art today. Likewise, as we shall see, Soleimani has come to resist the purely visual in her most recent work as well, acknowledging the importance of language as a component of visual art and culture in the current situation. When set within the physical space of the gallery or home, Soleimani’s *To Oblivion* sculptures are often juxtaposed with flat photographs of the same subjects (figure 5), some of them containing images of the sculptures next to which they stand. Setting up multiple dialectics – between photographic and real space, original and copy, fiction and non-fiction – these installations make us aware of photography as

Figure 5. Sheida Soleimani, *Raheleh*, archival pigment print, 101.6 cm x 68.58 cm, 2016. © 2019 Sheida Soleimani.

a matrix of both flattening and expansion, murder and remembrance. Avant-garde photomontage, these works suggest, helped to foster a greater awareness of photography as a technology that allows people to reimagine the world, and thereby to begin to remake it. The interwar period also made people aware that this photographically inspired process of reimagining the real possessed both hegemonic and liberatory potentials. Soleimani’s expanded photomontage practices seem consciously designed to consistently remind the viewer of photography’s double-sided nature, its ideological as well as its redemptive possibilities. Her work investigates and criticises social and political injustices, and it attempts to remember and memorialise the dead, to recall their tragedies in service of avoiding similar injustices in the future. But at the same time, through their fantastic nature, as well as their uneasy coupling of pleasure and pain, Soleimani’s artworks also remind us that photography was never a fully ‘objective’ medium, and all attempts at photographic representation – both ‘straight’ and montaged – carry possibilities as well as dangers.

The forms of the To Oblivion series, as Soleimani points out, were not directly based on Oursler, but rather on ‘Bobo dolls’, the name of toys used in a famous set of social psychology experiments that took place in the USA in the early 1960s. These dolls were figures that resembled a child’s punching bag in that they wobbled when hit and then righted themselves. They were used in a famous set of experiments conducted by psychologist Albert Bandura in which he demonstrated the cornerstone of his famous social learning theory: namely, that human beings learned by observing others. In Bandura’s case, one focus in his inquiry was how children learned aggression by observing an adult mistreat a Bobo doll – when exposed to such stimulus, they were more likely to exhibit the same behaviour themselves. In the context of Soleimani’s To Oblivion series, this Bobo doll form became a way of raising the question of how violence is today taught in Iran through public punishments and executions. In addition, this trope raises the question of Soleimani’s relationship with the Dada tradition, which also linked photomontage with dolls.

The Dadaist interest in dolls reflected a number of different concerns, including their celebration of unconventional and sometimes infantile behaviour as a way of criticising bourgeois values and disrupting everyday life, as well as their embrace of the forms and motifs of cabaret and theatrical performance. In addition, as Doherty has argued, dolls and childlike figures may also evoke the war neurotic’s desire for regression to an earlier stage of existence, connotations that informed the Berlin Dadaists’ use of montage to suggest shell shock and wartime trauma. Examples of Dada dolls comprise works like Sophie Taeuber-Arp’s psychoanalytically inspired marionettes created in 1918 for Carlo Gozzi’s eighteenth-century play King Stag; Heartfield’s puppets for German Soldier Songs, which he adapted after World War I for Max Reinhardt’s Smoke and Mirrors cabaret; and Hannah Höch’s Dada dolls, with which she performed and which she also exhibited at venues like the First International Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920.

In Dada photomontage, we find many doll-like portraits, by which I mean simplified, childlike figures, shapes that evoke childhood and different forms of play. As we shall see in the next section, such forms were particularly prominent among Höch’s later Weimar photomontages, where they were employed in socially critical ways. By the mid-twenties, as Lavin notes, ‘Höch was regularly using doll or mannequin images to comment ironically on the cultural construction of femininity.

As we have seen, Soleimani always draws from multiple historical sources, including avant-garde and contemporary art, Iranian history, and current events, a strategy that results in a richness of meaning and connotation. In terms of artistic precedents, however, Soleimani’s Iran photomontages perhaps most resemble those of the Berlin Dadaists, and in particular Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. Like Höch’s photomontages, particularly those of the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s, both the National Anthem and the To Oblivion photographs present portraits and tableaux of mismatched body parts, eschewing the more news-reportage approach we find in Heartfield’s
cinematic book covers for Malik Verlag in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as his *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (AIZ)* and *Volks-Illustrierte* photomontages between 1930 and 1938, which leave the human body much more intact, and instead juxtapose multiple fictive spaces created by different figure groups. As Zervigón notes, in these works Heartfield borrowed from the narrative conventions of the German film-still industry in order to simplify his contemporary reality and allow it to read as part of a larger historical trajectory or story. Like Heartfield, Soleimani draws on narrative techniques that emerged in cinema and photo-illustrated magazines, and focuses on specific individuals and political personages in her works – a selection of source materials that puts her at odds with Höch, who tended to appropriate more unidentifiable figures in her later-Weimar photomontages.

Soleimani is perhaps most like Höch in her construction of the human figure, which tends towards the childlike and grotesque. This Dada doll trope, of the adult reduced to a child, or to some other less-than-human, but still humanoid, status, also appears prominently in Höch’s photomontages. As suggested by Höch’s *Russische Tänzerin (MeinDouble) (Russian Dancer [My Double]),* 1928 (figure 6),

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which represents Til Brugman, Höch’s lesbian lover between 1926 and 1935. Höch used the Dadaist figure of the woman-girl to explore hybrid identity and the construction of one’s selfhood through interactions with significant others. Like Raoul Hausmann, Höch’s understanding of the self was influenced by the anarchist and psychoanalytic thought of Franz Jung, Otto Gross, and other writers associated with the journal Die freie Strasse. Central to Gross’s theories were the ideas that the structures and contradictions of capitalist societies were directly related to the repressive nature of the patriarchal bourgeois ego and that a sexual revolution had to take place before a true social revolution could occur. Or, as Raoul Hausmann characterised Dada identity, ‘Man is simultaneous, a monster of own and alien [Eigen und Fremd], now, before, after, and concurrently – a Buffalo Bill bursting with an Apache Romanticism.’

As conveyed by her twisted but playful and athletic pose, masculinising monocle, and page-boy haircut, Höch’s Dada woman-girl is both beautiful and grotesque. Her mismatched, glued-together body parts, which are fitted into a compressed stage-like space, seem balanced by the fact that they appear to function in a highly coordinated fashion. Russian Dancer thus operates as a means to attack the viewer’s preconceived notions of a ‘rational’ self, something that it achieves by undermining the ideal human form. In addition, with the image’s connotations of mirroring or doubling through its pairing with the similarly shaped and posed self-portrait Englische Tänzerin (English Dancer) of 1928, Russian Dancer can be read as an inducement to construct a new sense of identity in conjunction with a significant other. Like Höch, Soleimani focuses on hybridity and the construction of complex intersectional identities through interactions with others and with the products of mass culture and the mass media. Their works engage with psychoanalytic content; and – like Oursler – they use the body and sexuality as springboards for reimagining what it means to be human.

Like Heartfield, Soleimani is an explicitly political artist, sourcing images of real people and news events, and mobilising them to create a complex and open-ended commentary on her contemporary situation. Heartfield’s photomontage Die Nation steht geschlossen hinter mir (The Nation Stands United Behind Me) (figure 7), from AIZ in 1933, presents a classic example of Heartfield’s avant-garde political photomontage. Here, Hartfield combines a large portrait of Hitler striding forward and stepping out of the picture field with an aerial shot of a dense urban crowd and (on the edges of the frame) fragments of a map of Germany. Der Führer holds a chain which encircles the German State; and he is aided by groups of his Sturmabteilung paramilitary soldiers, who are larger than the figures in the crowd, and who also grasp the chain that constrains the nation.

The photo-montaged images are overlaid with three main blocks of text. The topmost, ‘The nation stands united behind me’, quotes a recent speech by Hitler, in which he affirmed the nation’s resolve as well as its approval of his policies. The middle headline, ‘Concentration Camp Germany’, seems to present Heartfield’s primary message about the contemporary political situation in Europe – through a wave of political arrests, his former country was becoming a dictatorship. Finally, ‘I no longer know parties. I know only prisoners’, is a slight misquotation of a line uttered by Kaiser Wilhelm at the beginning of World War I, who actually finished with the patriotic ‘I only know Germans’. By undermining the phrase’s patriotism, Heartfield underlines continuities between the authoritarian rule of the country’s former Kaiserreich and that of present-day Nazi Germany.

Through an interplay of texts and images, Heartfield’s photomontage engages its viewers, using humour to encourage them to see beneath Hitler’s political propaganda. Although its main meaning is clear and pronounced, the photomontage is by no means simple. It compares contemporary Germany to the nation on the eve of World War I; and it in part revolves around the multiple meanings of the German word, ‘geschlossen’, which can signify both resolved and closed in the
sense of locked up. Although clearly artificial, it proports to show a ‘truth’, but in a way that is open ended and that encourages its viewers to view their worlds critically and with suspicion.

In the context of the magazine as a whole (AIZ volume 12, issue 27 from 1933), Heartfield’s photomontage introduced an article on the Nazi arrests of political opponents that had begun after Hitler was appointed German Chancellor, and the contemporary camps the new government was erecting to hold political prisoners. In this two-page spread, entitled ‘In Deutschland Nichts Neues!’, a pun on Erich Maria Remark’s classic anti-war novel from 1928, All Quite on the Western Front, images of police and men with their arms raised are repeated so as to suggest the rapid growth of mass incarceration in Germany.23

Soon, as the historical record shows, detention camps would be used to detain other minorities including Jews, homosexuals, and Roma (Gypsies). Shortly thereafter, these installations would directly support the Nazi’s mass extermination and eugenics policies.24 Made of fragments of world news – documentary photographs, quotes, and reports – Heartfield’s photomontage thus remade its contemporary

24 – On the history of Darwinist and eugenicist thought in Germany since the late 1860s, see Richard Weikart, From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004. On the intellectual grounds of the Nazi State’s negative eugenics polities, whereby it defined the national body or Volkskörper as that of a specific (albeit vaguely defined) ‘Aryan race’, the ‘healthy’ development of which was threatened by people of ‘lesser value’ within the borders of the Third Reich – first, mentally ill or ‘hereditarily sick’ Germans, and later, homosexuals, Jews, Roma, Slavs, and others that the Nazis saw as dangerous to social health – see Detlev J. K. Peukert, ‘The Genesis of the “Final Solution” from the Spirit of Science’, in Reevaluating the Third Reich, ed. Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, New York: Holmes and Meier 1993, 234–52.
reality to envision and predict a terrifying near future. Although clarity was central
to its presentation, so was the embrace of connotation and play, something that
makes the accuracy of its forecast seem perhaps even more terrifying.

Like Heartfield, Soleimani reinterprets current and historical events in her
Iran photomontages and photosculptures, mobilising the past and the present to
imagine the near future. Unlike Heartfield, however, Soleimani did not emphasise
language in her work until after the To Oblivion series. Indeed, although Soleimani
titled her works, she was even less linguistic than Höch, who at the very least
inscribed her name and the title beneath the frame of the image, something that
Soleimani did not do. This aversion to linguistically coded content changed
radically in 2017, when Soleimani began her Medium of Exchange series,
a photomontage-based corpus of mixed-media works that explored trauma and
memory, sexuality and violence, Middle East politics, and diasporic experience.

Language emerged in Soleimani’s art, however, not primarily through texts but
through performances, sounds, and spoken words.

As we have seen, Soleimani has practised photomontage with a keen awareness of its
history. At the same time, by embracing digital technologies in all their forms, she has
also intermixed photomontage with other media far more than any of the original avant-
gardists. As a result, her work seems to be able to combine divergent attitudes far more
easily than their work; and, in particular, closer examination of her most recent work
shows her to mix divergent 'attitudes' or perspectives that have traditionally set Dada
and Surrealism apart, namely, conceptual alienation versus corporeal engagement.

According to Rosalind Krauss, the pivotal difference between Dada photo-
montage and Surrealist photography had to do with the relative presence of either
the photographer or the world in the image itself. Surrealist 'photographs are not
interpretations of reality, decoding it, as in Heartfield’s photomontages. They are
presentations of that very reality as configured, or coded, or written’.25 The
obvious cuts and jarring juxtapositions of the Dadaists, in other words, often
separated from one another by the white page that constituted their support,
distanced the spectator from the photographs’ indexical sources, an alienation
that allowed viewers to perceive their images as conceptual statements about the
world: subjective, allegorical interpretations of social and political tendencies. ‘The
white page’, as she put it, ‘is not the opaque surface of cubist collage, asserting the
formal and material unity of the visual support; the white page is rather the fluid
matrix within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation, held
within a condition of exteriority, of syntax, of spacing.’26 The Surrealists, on the
other hand, largely eschewed photomontage, opting for other techniques of dou-
bling or defamiliarising the image; manipulations that preserved the physical
world’s presence, while at the same time allowing it to appear as mysterious or
uncanny. Dada photomontages thus foregrounded the presence of the artist (or
cultural producer), and the interpretive or even partisan nature of the image; while
Surrealist photographs emphasised the presence of the world (and the subjects
within it), albeit one that was written or coded, permeated by meaning.

As suggested by Medium of Exchange, Soleimani’s most recent large-scale project,
Krauss’s distinction between the Dadaist and Surrealist approach to photography –
viewer alienation (and the concomitant emphasis on the conceptual nature of the
image) or mystery and uncanniness (with its stress on the polysemy of the world and
the people within it) – no longer makes much sense; at least when used to examine the
work of radical artists like Soleimani. A series of photographs, videos, and print
publications, Medium of Exchange is based on intense research that the artist con-
ducted into the relationships between the USA and the nations of the Organization of
the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) since 1960, when the organisation was
first formed. Largely relying on appropriated texts and images, the project presents
documentary evidence pertaining to war and the oil trade in the Middle East, Africa,
and South America. The resulting images and scenes, nonetheless, are wildly fantastic, absurd reconstructions or reimaginings of the real.

Different iterations of the project, which began in 2016, have appeared in different venues since 2018, including the Edel Assanti Gallery, London, UK; Contemporary Arts Centre, Cincinnati, OH, USA; Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA, USA; and the CUE Art Foundation, New York, NY, USA. In 2019, yet another iteration appeared at Library Street Collective, Detroit, MI, USA. Sometimes, just the photographs were presented; in other installations, only the video was playing. The black-and-white publications, which intermix screen grabs from the video and reproductions of Soleimani’s photographs, and combine them with their written and visual documentary source materials, provided an additional conduit through which the artist imparted her message to the public. In all of these configurations, Soleimani explored the impact of political and economic power on the body, reimaging abstract relations through uncanny, allegorical personifications.

Different exhibitions present varied aspects of a much larger story. In Atlanta, nine freestanding photographs of 60 inches × 40 inches, supported by custom-made oil-can frames, presented a twisted history of the US–OPEC relationship (figure 8). Most of them depicted tableaux in which one or two figures – actors wearing photomontage masks bearing the stitched-together visages of assorted government officials – interacted within a photosculptural environment. In one, Dick Cheney, wearing only a $100-bill towel and a baseball cap, holds hands with the only slightly more dressed Donald Rumsfeld: half-human, half-photographic lovers, canoodling in a gridded environment of repeating pipelines, explosions, and Halliburton insignias (figure 9). In another, a bare-breasted Henry Kissinger on bended knee, his male head montaged onto a female body, raises an oil-smeared diamond ring to the partially nude José Maria Botelho de Vasconcelos, Angola’s Minister of Petroleum. Soleimani’s political targets are also clearly hybrid – their bodies mix gender and race, and their sexuality seems to flow in normative as well as non-normative directions (figure 10). More than just emphasising sexuality, however, the actors’ poses foreground relations of domination and submission, while the environments in which they exist reference war and oil production.

Like John Heartfield’s photomontages for AIZ and Volks-Illustrierte, the large-scale Medium of Exchange photographs disrupt political and economic power through appropriation, photomontage, and irony, creating visual allegories that both document and criticise official agents and events. But much more than
Heartfield, Soleimani emphasises the indexical presence of her subjects by using live actors in conjunction with photomontage masks and a photosculptural, prop-laden environment (figure 11). Thus, while at the same time she continues Heartfield’s emphasis on the interpretive nature of the constructed image into which appropriated reports and other forms of documentary evidence have been fitted, she makes her photomontages seem more physical and as a result her allegories of power become even more perverse.

This powerful ‘critical perversity’, in many ways a legacy of Höch’s polymorphously perverse photomontage work, can be seen in the bizarre eroticism of many of Soleimani’s configurations, as well as in how strongly her tableaus resist and subvert the primary ruling pieties that govern today’s social, political, and economic world orders. The project’s first video, Medium of Exchange, 2018, which premiered at the Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati, OH, in 2018, demonstrated this as well: it focused on sex and violence, while dismantling clear distinctions between gender, race, and class.27 Throughout the thirty-two-minute work, a scene repeats in which two sets of masculine hands play a violent game of

Slapjack with a pack of Iraq’s Most Wanted playing cards (figure 12). Depicted in bird’s-eye view, their game is set against a photomontaged table top consisting of fragments of a chequered picnic cloth mixed with images of fires, desert, and US military compounds during the 2003 Iraq War. On the audio track, a child reads military correspondence about the food policy on US bases; and as the game progresses, the actors’ hands, cards, and table surface became occluded with black viscous oil.

Intercut with this increasingly obscure game, a number of live-action tableaus appear in which the same political figures that star in the large-scale photographs speak to one another in dialogues appropriated from declassified military documents, political dispatches, and documentary news sources (figure 13). Acting out scenarios that evoke both love and hate, attraction and repulsion, the actors become integrated with one another and the environment through erotic contact as well as by means of flowing substances like oil, candle wax, and runny ice cream. Repeatedly drawing parallels between sexuality and consumption, the video
integrates the living with the photographed body to create an uncanny mixture of identification and alienation.

According to the artist, the *Medium of Exchange* video is intended as the first in a series of approximately fourteen films. Whether this series will reach completion or not remains to be seen. But what is already clear from Soleimani’s complex multimedia project is that our bodies lie at the centre of multiple and conflicting symbolic systems, complex networks of representation that can either liberate or enslave. By embracing both alienation and seduction, the Dada and the Surrealist photographic traditions, *Medium of Exchange* proves that radical art remains possible today, a practice Soleimani conducts as a type of formally and materially complex investigation that remains grounded in photomontage but sets the strategy in an expanding network of mass-media technologies.

At the beginning of this article, I called Soleimani a subaltern cyborg – subaltern representing her concentration on colonial histories, and cyborg because of the technologies that she uses and the ways she represents the body as permeated by
industry and manufactured goods. I would now like to clarify this appellation by insisting that Soleimani is a cyborg first, and subaltern only in a less fundamental way. The nature of her research is such that her focus on colonialism in her most recent work could easily shift again – to a greater concentration on gender, for example – but her formal development has always been firmly concentrated on the relationship between the body and lens-based technology, and this concentration seems only to grow more intense as time passes. A third aspect of Soleimani’s practice that marks her as a cyborg is her adoption of acting and performance, another characteristic that recalls an avant-garde precedent.28

Soleimani’s employment of performance is most obvious in the *Medium of Exchange* video, where actors speak long lines and perform actions that unfold over time. But her use of performance can also be seen in her flat photographs and soft sculptures, which employ narrative conventions drawn from cinema, including ritualised expression, gesture, clothing, props, and mise-en-scène. Finally, it can be also seen in an early series of performance photographs made as part of the *National Anthem* series in which Soleimani posed nude from the waist down wearing a pink hijab, thereby subverting the social and religious functions of the garment (figure 14). Exploring the ‘performance of identity’ practices made famous by postmodern photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, and Carrie Mae Weems, these staged *National Anthem* performances

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28 – On Berlin Dada performances, happenings, and media hoaxes, see Biro, *Dada Cyborg*, 50–64. On how Heartfield and Grosz performed their public identities, see Zervigón, *John Heartfield*, 66–94.
counter political and religious restraint of the body with sexual display. By throwing off patriarchal constraint in the most radical fashion possible, these images affirmed female sexuality as a revolutionary force.

Although Berlin Dada could be a model for Soleimani’s performances – Höch dressed up and performed with dolls – the actions that Soleimani stages are more sexualised, and thus recall New York Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, whose contributions to rethinking identity in the teens and 1920s could be said to rival that of Marcel Duchamp, with whom she was in close dialogue. As scholars such as Amelia Jones and Irene Gammel have incisively and brilliantly demonstrated, the Baroness practised art in an extreme variety of different media including poetry, painting, drawing, found object sculpture, fashion, and, very importantly, through the everyday life performance of a stylised, not entirely rational, hypersexual persona.29 As recorded in photographs, paintings, and written accounts, von Freytag-Loringhoven played this performative Dadaist character so as to subvert traditional gender roles in a number of different ways: she posed nude; she shaved and shellacked her head; she was promiscuous and sexually aggressive; and she fashioned and wore a series of provocative ensembles that added machined and natural objects to her body (figure 15).

Gammel’s description of an example of the Baroness’s performance art is worth quoting at length.

One day [American artist and muralist Louis] Bouché brought her a gift, a newspaper clipping representing Nude Descending a Staircase. In a spontaneous protodada act, the Baroness promptly applied it to her body in a gesture so striking that it was memorialized by Bouché: ‘She was all joy, took the clipping and gave herself a rubdown with it, missing no part of her anatomy. The climax was a poem she had composed for Duchamp. It went “Marcel, Marcel, I love you like Hell, Marcel”’. Tired of waiting for Marcel to respond to her love call, she was effectively ‘intercoursing’ with the elusive artist through the body of his work. This autoerotic act slyly alluded to Duchamp’s recent abandonment of traditional painting, for he had dismissed it as ‘olfactive masturbation’. But even more important, the Baroness, a nude model herself, was charging her body as artwork. Using the era’s most famous artwork as a cheeky sex toy in this autoerotic performance act, she ingeniously turned the viewer’s attention away from Duchamp’s abstract representation of the Nude to her living body as work of art, an art charged with kinetic energy, presenting her original kinesthetic Dada – a truly new form of art.30


30 – Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 173
By making Duchamp’s Nude literally descend down her own body surface, the Baroness achieved a brilliant transfer of sorts: we now behold her as the literal embodiment of Duchamp’s erotically and kinaesthetically charged nude, for her many roles and identities are fragmented, eroticised, and lit up by the city’s energy. Whereas Duchamp’s Nude is just a semiabstract representation of movement in painting, this representational focus further highlighted by the fact that she was using a copy, the Baroness’s body work of art is literally moving, thus keeping the viewer’s eye in movement and enacting the antiretinal aesthetics that Duchamp had embraced. Since Duchamp was already experimenting with movement, as in his 1913 Bicycle Wheel, retrospectively declared a ready-made in 1915, the inspiration of the Baroness’s kinaesthetic body art must count as her pioneering act in New York that would effectively give birth to what Jones has so aptly termed performative Dada, New York Dada’s centrally important innovation in locating art in daily life.31

31 – Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 172–73.
Through eroticised performances that linked bodies to machines, the Baroness's innovative Dada performance practices sought to produce a revolution in everyday life.

Soleimani’s performances – her own and, more frequently, those of her actors – recall this earlier ephemeral performance art of the Baroness. Not only do they subvert gender through clothing, gesture, and action, but they emphasise sexuality, mobilising it to destabilise the social and political status quo. In addition, Soleimani’s staging of the human body – which uses photography, photomontage, sculpture, and installation to take the body apart and then reform it in a new and more expanded configuration – recalls that of the Baroness in that it consistently links the human form to both machines and nature. As we have seen, Soleimani stages the body by clothing it in a carapace of natural and mechanically reproduced forms: real objects as well as fragments of appropriated photographs of known and anonymous individuals. It is this permeability of nature with manufacture, as well as the consistent narrative connection of sexuality with revolutionary trauma, that makes Soleimani so fundamentally cyborgian. Like the Baroness, she seems to recognise the underlying heterogeneity of identity; and even more than the Baroness, Soleimani sees lens-based media as a central matrix through which all identities are produced – and dissolved. Through her reflexive use of performance, photomontage, and video, Soleimani calls attention to our cyborgian nature, and to the social and political dilemmas that divide our time.