WHAT REMAINS

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, who expressed his support for my decision to pursue art by reciting this poem to me:

« فرزند هنر باش نه فرزند پدر که هنر زنده کند نام پدر »

“Be a child of art, not a child of your father, for art keeps the father’s name alive.”

Throughout all these years, the sound of his voice reciting this poem has remained with me, and I hope I can honour his words by keeping his name alive in the way he believed art could.

To Shahram, who has been far more than a husband to me, a companion, supporter, encourager, and someone who has always believed in me, even in moments when I struggled to believe in myself.

And to the women of Iran, whose lives have been filled with challenges, yet whose existence continues to be deeply alive with resilience, dignity, and the desire for life.

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between body, memory, violence, and archival imagery through a practice-based artistic methodology grounded in the lived experiences of Iranian women. Drawing from informal and digital archives, including social media images, protest documentation, personal photographs, and circulated visual material, the project examines how images shaped by censorship, instability, and fragmentation can be transformed through material and spatial processes.

Instead of treating images as fixed representations, the project approaches them as unstable materials that undergo physical transformation through cyanotype, image transfer, scanning, layering, ceramic processes, and installation. These methods introduce interruption, loss, distortion, and material variation, shifting the image from circulation into tactile and embodied form.

A central concern of the research is the ethics of representing violence. Instead of reproducing graphic imagery directly, the project explores alternative strategies of visibility through fragmentation, radiographic imagery, partial transfer, and material mediation. In this way, the work attempts to resist the spectacle of violence while maintaining traces of bodily vulnerability and lived experience.

The resulting installation functions as a spatial and material archive in which transparency, layering, suspension, and viewer movement shape how images are encountered. Through these processes, the thesis argues that artistic practice can operate as a form of embodied research, where knowledge emerges through physical engagement with images, materials, and space.

Digital Tools Acknowledgment

Artificial intelligence tools, specifically ChatGPT and Claude, were used in a limited capacity during the development of this written thesis for language support, including grammar checking, sentence clarification, and editorial revision. These tools were not used to generate the core concepts, research questions, artistic ideas, material processes, or personal reflections presented in this project. All artistic methodologies, interpretations, and critical positions were developed by the author through independent research, studio practice, and lived experience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH MOTIVATION AND PERSONAL CONTEXT

This research explores how fragmented images related to Iranian women can be materially transformed through photographic and tactile processes to engage questions of memory, visibility, and everyday life. Grounded in a practice-based and research-creation approach, the project draws from informal digital archives, including social media images, protest photographs, and publicly circulated visual material.

As a woman born and raised in Iran, my artistic practice has been shaped by experiences of censorship, surveillance, and social regulation surrounding women's bodies and visibility. Before migrating to Canada, my photographic work focused on self-representation and the condition of women within constrained social and cultural frameworks. Relocating to Canada created a critical distance that allowed me to reconsider these experiences through artistic practice and material experimentation.

This project does not seek to reproduce violence through direct representation. Instead, it focuses on what I describe as the desire for an ordinary life: access to bodily autonomy, visibility, safety, and participation in public and private life. Within the Iranian context, such conditions are often shaped by legal restrictions, compulsory hijab, and broader systems of control affecting women's lives.

The title *What Remains* is also in dialogue with Sally Mann's photographic series of the same name (2003), in which Mann examines death, bodily decay, and what persists after physical dissolution. Mann's practice relies upon the indexical singularity of the photographic encounter, the unique physical and temporal presence carried by the large-format negative itself. This project begins from a different point: after dispersal and degradation, working with low-resolution images already circulating through unregulated online flows, largely drained of physical presence. The two projects share a question — what persists after dissolution, but

begin from opposite material conditions: Mann moves from the singular, physically present negative toward decay, while this project moves from images already dispersed and degraded toward material presence. Through cyanotype and transfer, the work attempts to restore a sense of materiality, duration, and affect to images that digital circulation has stripped away.

The images used in this project are primarily drawn from informal and publicly circulated image networks described in detail in Chapter 3. Many are low-resolution, compressed, repeatedly shared, or detached from their original contexts. Because these materials circulate outside official systems of preservation and representation, they also function as a form of counter-archive.[1] Following Hito Steyerl's discussion of the poor image,[2] these materials are approached not through photographic quality, but through circulation, urgency, and accessibility.

The project does not preserve these images as stable documents; it transforms them through cyanotype and transfer processes in which parts of an image may dissolve, fade, or fail to carry. Such failures are retained as part of the work, an instability discussed at length in Chapter 3.

The project shifts the image from the digital environment into physical and spatial form, where it is encountered through material presence, surface, and bodily movement. In the exhibition, this shift became physical behaviour: visitors touched the fabric and the yarn-and-wood objects to feel their texture; and on reaching the projection, they discovered the wall was not empty — moving closer, they found the folders, looked at them from different angles, and leafed through the photographs inside.

[1] The term "counter-archive" is used here to describe informal, non-institutional, and often digitally circulated collections of images that emerge outside official state-controlled archives. These materials are typically fragmented, unstable, and anonymous, yet they provide alternative forms of historical memory and lived experience.

[2] See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," e-flux journal 10 (2009).

Earlier works such as *Self-Portrait* (Figure 1) and *Wedding Handkerchiefs* (Figure 2) explored questions of gender and identity through collage and symbolic imagery. This thesis expands those concerns into a broader engagement with collective memory, archival absence, and the representation of Iranian women beyond fixed narratives of victimhood.



Figure 1. *Self-Portrait* (2024).



Figure 2. *Wedding Handkerchiefs* (2025).

These earlier works marked the beginning of my engagement with image transfer, collage, and symbolic material processes that continue throughout this thesis.

The resulting installation brings together fragmented images, bodily traces, and layered materials within space. By "poetic archive," I refer to an arrangement of images and materials that operates through fragmentation, material transformation, and affective encounter rather than stable historical documentation.

1.2 THESIS QUESTION

This research is guided by the following question:

How can digitally circulated and fragmented images related to Iranian women be transformed through material and photographic processes into spatial works that engage memory, bodily experience, and ordinary life without reproducing violence as spectacle?

1.3 OVERVIEW OF KEY THEMES

This thesis is organized around four interconnected areas of inquiry, followed by a concluding reflection. Chapter 1 introduces the research motivation, personal context, and the central question guiding the project. Chapter 2 situates the project within the historical and contemporary conditions shaping women's visibility and representation in Iran. Chapter 3 examines the archival framework of the project, addressing informal digital image circulation, protest imagery, and the concept of the poor image. Chapter 4 engages with the body as a site of memory, fragmentation, and material trace, and develops the artistic methodology and studio practice through which images are physically transformed. The concluding chapter reflects on the exhibition and situates the work within the present political moment.

CHAPTER 2: GENDER, VISIBILITY, AND CONTROL OF WOMEN IN IRAN

2.1 HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONDITIONS OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION

Iranian women's resistance has a continuous historical arc, one that this project — in both its text and in the *Archive of the Body* slideshow — follows. Women were present in large numbers in the December 1978 and February 1979 demonstrations, before the revolution's victory; and only weeks later, on 8 March 1979, they staged the first major protest against compulsory hijab, a protest against the very revolution in which they had taken part. This pattern continued in the decades that followed: visible presence in the 1997 election campaigns and the 1999 university dormitory events.

The pattern deepened with the 2009 Green Movement,[3] with its images of Neda Agha-Soltan and green-clad women marching alongside men; Vida Movahed's silent stand on a utility box on Enghelab (Revolution) Street, her headscarf raised on a stick (2017), which set off a wave of symbolic acts — the White Wednesdays, the removal of headscarves; the protests of December 2017 and the November 2019 killings, born of poverty and despair and answered with bullets and forced confessions on state television; the "Woman, Life, Freedom"[4] movement of September 2022, following the killing of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police with its images of Mahsa and Nika, burned headscarves, cut hair, bodies struck by pellets, and blinded eyes; the bare protest of Ahou Daryaei in front of a university that had turned her away for "improper hijab" (November 2024), a naked plea for dignity and an ordinary life; and finally the mass killings of 8 and 9 January 2026, the latest chapter of this history. This project was written in the midst of that same arc.

[3] The Green Movement (Persian: Jonbesh-e Sabz) refers to the mass protests following Iran's disputed June 2009 presidential election. The killing of Neda Agha-Soltan, recorded on a bystander's phone and circulated worldwide, made it an early demonstration of citizen imagery documenting state violence.

[4] "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Persian: Zan, Zendegi, Azadi) is a slogan associated with the 2022 protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini. It became a widely recognized expression of resistance, particularly in relation to women's rights, bodily autonomy, and social freedoms.

The representation of women in Iran underwent significant transformation following the 1979 revolution. Prior to this period, women participated more visibly in public, cultural, and artistic life, including cinema, music, and performance. While this period was shaped by its own political and social complexities, women's public visibility was comparatively less restricted (Keddie 2003).

This shift in visibility is not only evident in legal and institutional frameworks, but also in the ways bodies occupy and move within public space.



Figure 3. Women in public space in Iran, before the 1979 revolution.
Source: Anonymous Photograph, online archive, accessed December 15, 2025.



Figure 4. Women in public space in Iran, after the 1979 revolution.
Source: Anonymous Photograph, online archive, accessed April 26, 2026.

Following the revolution, the representation and visibility of women became increasingly regulated by the state through legal, ideological, and cultural frameworks. Women's appearance in public space was redefined through compulsory hijab, and their presence in media and cultural production was subject to strict censorship. Certain forms of expression, such as singing, dancing, or bodily display, were restricted or prohibited. In visual media, women's bodies became highly controlled through imposed dress codes and limitations on physical interaction. These constraints have produced, and continue to produce, forms of representation that are often disconnected from lived reality (Mehran 2000).

What changed after the revolution was not simply women's visibility, but the conditions under which visibility became possible. Women's bodies became increasingly shaped through regulation, social expectation, and self-monitoring.

Beyond representation, women's roles within legal and institutional structures have also been shaped by inequality. Limitations in areas such as legal authority, access to certain professions, and autonomy in personal decision-making contribute to a broader framework in which women are positioned as secondary within social and legal hierarchies. While some restrictions affect men as well, the degree to which women's bodies, behaviours, and life choices are regulated remains significantly more extensive.

These conditions extend into everyday life, where the experience of being a woman often involves continuous self-regulation. Women learn to navigate public and private spaces through self-censorship, adapting behaviour, appearance, and expression to remain safe. As a result, many women continuously adjust how they present themselves in public space.

Despite these constraints, representation is not fixed or singular. There remains a persistent gap between official portrayals of women and lived reality. State-controlled media often presents an image of the Iranian woman as compliant, modest, and ideologically aligned, whereas ordinary life reveals ongoing negotiation and resistance. In public spaces, this

resistance can take the form of subtle or overt acts of defiance, including the rejection of compulsory hijab and the assertion of personal presence.

Within this context, visibility is shaped by negotiation, restriction, and adaptation, and the practice developed in this thesis emerges directly from these conditions. The censorship of everything related to the female body throughout my education is what led me, years later, to scan my own body: to record, with an instrument that touches the skin as it sees it, the body that had always been treated as taboo, and to exhibit it openly, leaving the viewer free to look, to grow curious, to discover, and to touch. What was systematically hidden from me became, in this project, the thing most deliberately offered to be seen.

2.1.1 REFRAMING REPRESENTATION: NESHAT, *SHE WHO TELLS A STORY*

This project positions itself critically in relation to a mode of representing Middle Eastern women within contemporary art, exemplified by aspects of Shirin Neshat's practice and the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2013). In the *Women of Allah* series (1993–97), Neshat brings together the veiled woman, the weapon, and Persian script inscribed on skin. Whatever the stated intention, this iconography — chador, gun, indecipherable script — deploys precisely the set of signs that Western exhibition contexts expect, and consume, as the image of the "Middle Eastern woman." The critique is not mine alone: Lindsey Moore has argued that these images invite a neo-orientalist reading, and even within the exhibition's own catalogue, Michket Krifa acknowledges that Western critics distorted Neshat's artistic singularity into an anthropological curiosity, while the curator, Kristen Gresh, concedes that uniting these photographers by gender and geography was seen by some, ironically, as confirming a stereotype. A similar pattern appears in Shadi Ghadirian's *Like Every Day* series, in which women in floral chadors are pictured with a domestic object; an iron, a grater, a cooking pot in place of a face.

What these frameworks leave out is a reality I know as a woman who has lived in Iran: since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have continuously fought, against every pressure, to take control of their own dress, and have insisted on their presence in universities, workplaces, and public life. In this account, the Iranian woman is not a passive, covered object but an agent who continuously negotiates and pushes back. This project's refusal of a victim-centred gaze, traced through the works themselves in Chapters 3 and 4 begins from that reality; even the archival images chosen for this text (Figures 3 and 4) deliberately avoid stereotypical imagery.

This reading is, it should be said, a contested one; these works were often made with the intention of challenging stereotypes, and more sympathetic readings exist. My critique is directed not at the intentions of these artists, but at an iconography that, within Western exhibition contexts, is too easily reabsorbed into the very framework it claims to challenge.

2.2 CENSORSHIP, VIOLENCE, AND SYSTEMATIC SUPPRESSION

The regulation of women's bodies in Iran operates through interconnected legal, cultural, and institutional systems that shape both visibility and everyday experience. In this context, censorship extends beyond artistic production and becomes part of broader mechanisms controlling bodily presence and representation. Within visual culture, representations of the body are tightly controlled. The depiction of hair, skin, or bodily form beyond prescribed limits is restricted. What cannot be shown becomes as significant as what remains visible. These constraints are historically rooted in institutional transformations such as the Cultural Revolution of the 1980s,[5] during which cultural and educational systems were restructured to align with ideological frameworks. Images containing representations of the human body were often removed, altered, or censored, limiting access to important artistic references.

[5] The Cultural Revolution in Iran (1980–1983) involved the restructuring of universities and cultural institutions to align with Islamic ideological frameworks, resulting in widespread censorship and restrictions on artistic and educational materials.

For example, during my undergraduate studies in photography at the University of Tehran (2012–2016), nude paintings, despite being central to art history, were not shown in class. Their absence shaped how the body could be discussed and represented within artistic education. Such conditions persist in contemporary contexts.

Censorship operates not only through prohibition but also through internalized norms and the anticipation of surveillance. This condition corresponds closely to Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power, in which the awareness of being perpetually visible leads individuals to internalize surveillance and become, in his words, the principle of their own subjection (Foucault 1977, 202–203). Censorship in this sense does not need to be enforced at every moment; it is carried within the body.

Artistic production therefore often involves strategies of concealment, negotiation, or adaptation. In one instance, a graduate student presented photographic work depicting menstrual blood, installing it in a way that prevented it from being easily visible. This reflected how artists learn to negotiate institutional boundaries through concealment and adaptation. Beyond institutional spaces, forms of self-censorship also shape ordinary life, influencing appearance, bodily presence, and access to public visibility. These systems are reinforced through different forms of gender-based violence, including harassment, domestic abuse, and other forms of bodily and social harm that often occur within conditions of limited protection or accountability (United Nations 2024).

As a result, many women continuously adjust their appearance and behaviour to move safely through public life. Yet, these systems are continuously negotiated and challenged through everyday acts of adaptation, refusal, and visibility. Within this context butler censorship and violence shape not only what can be seen, but also how representation becomes possible.

2.3 WOMEN'S PURSUIT OF EVERYDAY LIFE, WORK, AND FREEDOM

In the context of this research, "the pursuit of an ordinary life"[6] refers to access to fundamental aspects of everyday living, including bodily autonomy, freedom of movement, participation in social and professional life, and the ability to live with dignity and safety. For many Iranian women, these conditions have been shaped and constrained by overlapping legal, cultural, and social structures. Inequalities in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and personal autonomy position women unequally within social and legal systems (Mehran 2000). These limitations extend beyond formal structures into ordinary life, where social and familial pressures often regulate appearance, personal choices, and everyday conduct. In this context, autonomy is not simply given but continuously negotiated.

For example, my own experience navigating inheritance-related legal processes over seven years made these inequalities tangible. Within a family context shaped by social expectations, pursuing my legal rights involved sustained pressure and moments of conflict. This revealed how legal entitlement does not necessarily translate into accessible justice, and how, for women, the process of claiming rights can itself become a site of struggle. At the same time, gestures that may appear ordinary elsewhere, such as uncovering one's hair, can acquire heightened political and symbolic meaning. Within this framework, the body becomes a site through which everyday acts of resistance and self-definition emerge.

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement brought global attention to these embodied forms of resistance, but such acts are not new. They are embedded within ordinary life as ongoing practices of negotiation, persistence, and refusal. Within this context, the pursuit is not passive, but deeply connected to questions of agency, visibility, and self-determination. This

[6] The phrase deliberately echoes, and departs from, "the pursuit of happiness" in the United States Declaration of Independence (1776). Where that formulation names an aspirational ideal pursued under conditions of presumed liberty, "the pursuit of an ordinary life" names a situation in which the baseline itself, dress, movement, work, everyday visibility must be fought for. What is elsewhere a given becomes, in the Iranian context, an aspiration.

section does not aim to provide a comprehensive social or political account, but rather to situate the project within a lived and contested reality. The artistic practice developed in this thesis engages with these conditions not through direct illustration, but through material transformation, fragmentation, and spatial construction. In doing so, the work reflects an ongoing concern with dignity, visibility, and the possibility of living an ordinary life under conditions of restriction.

CHAPTER 3: ARCHIVE AND COUNTER-ARCHIVE PRACTICE

3.1 INFORMAL AND DIGITAL ARCHIVES

The visual materials used in this project are primarily drawn from informal and digital sources, including search engines such as Google Images, personal archives, and social media platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram. These sources do not function as stable institutional archives. Instead, they exist as constantly changing collections of images circulating outside official systems of preservation and control. Many of these images circulate as reposted, compressed, or contextually detached files.

Their authorship, context, and longevity are often uncertain. Rather than functioning as complete historical records, they operate as partial traces of lived experience (Merewether 2006; Derrida 1995). For Derrida, the archive is marked by a double force: the drive to preserve and, inseparable from it, a force of destruction — the archive consumes what it holds even as it holds it (Derrida 1995).

The counter-archive of this project lives that contradiction literally: the same platforms that preserve these images delete them. In contrast to state-controlled media and institutional archives, where visual material is often shaped through censorship, omission, or ideological filtering, informal image networks provide access to alternative modes of representation. During moments of political crisis, such as protests, official media frequently suppresses or distorts events. In such contexts, images shared by individuals on social media offer more immediate and situated perspectives.

Within the Iranian context, the use of these platforms carries additional political significance: access to them is restricted, so that sharing images online is itself a form of visibility and resistance, a condition examined more fully in section 3.4. Users circulate images that challenge official representations: appearing without compulsory hijab, engaging in

prohibited activities, or documenting aspects of ordinary life excluded from dominant narratives.

The question of what makes such material a counter-archive, given that platforms themselves impose their own forms of removal, algorithmic filtering, and surveillance, is addressed in section 3.4.1. For this reason, the images used in this project are understood as being closely connected to lived experience. They are not necessarily more reliable or complete, but they provide access to perspectives that are often marginalized or erased within official archives.

3.1.1 ETHICS, CONSENT, AND THE CIVIL CONTRACT OF THE IMAGE

Working with these images demands a direct confrontation with the question of consent; a question to which this project has no simple answer, and claims none. My own position must first be made clear: I am not the photographer of these images. Before reaching me, they had already been shared and reshared countless times across social media, and in most cases were circulated by the families themselves. The ethical question of this project is therefore not the question of taking an image, but of using an image already in circulation.

Ariella Azoulay's framework in The *Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) is instructive here. Azoulay argues that photography establishes a civil contract among photographer, subject, and viewer: an image made and circulated under conditions of danger is a claim addressed to the world, and this claim obligates the viewer not merely permitted to look, but responsible to respond. Within the context of this project, that contract takes a concrete and painful form: on some Persian-language pages that circulate images of the dead, families of victims themselves reach out to ask why their child's name and image have not been posted, requesting to be seen so that the blood of their loved ones is not erased and their memory remains within collective consciousness. Here, consent is inverted: being remembered is itself a demand.

This does not hold for everyone, however, and the archive of this project is built on that awareness. The images I have access to represent only a small fraction of the actual number of those killed, many images remain forever out of reach, because the individuals are unidentified, had no presence on social media, or because their families, for reasons of their own, did not want a name or image to remain. These absences are respected; their place in the installation is discussed in section 4.2.1.

The project's practical parameters emerged from these considerations: no image was taken from a private account, and only images that had already circulated widely and publicly were used. Consent takes a different form in each body of work: in the hashtag image pairs, the individuals shared their own photographs publicly for circulation; the images of acid attack survivors were published by various pages with the consent of the survivors themselves; and the radiographic images carry no identifying features. Nor was any selective criterion applied beyond breadth of circulation, veiled or unveiled, old or young.

It must also be acknowledged that this project is made possible by a position in which collecting and recirculating these images carries no cost: I work from a place where recording an image does not carry a ten-year prison sentence[7], and that distance is itself part of my responsibility. This same awareness of risk set a further boundary for the project: I have not used images of protesters, of the injured, of detainees, or of anyone whose image, I judged, could put them in danger if circulated.

What remains unresolved is this: the dead cannot consent. Some of these women, had they lived, might not have wanted their images to circulate in this way. My position is that keeping their memory, their ideas, and their path alive outweighs this uncertainty, but it is a position, not a resolution. And if the possibility of unintended readings were enough to stop the

[7] The reference is to Masoud Piyahu, sentenced to ten years in prison for filming the protester who became known as "Tehran's Tank Man", discussed in section 3.4.1.

artist from acting, no image would ever be made or retold; every image and every text remains open to readings its maker never intended. What is within my power is honesty about these considerations; the final judgment on whether this work maintains its distance from consumption of the image is entrusted to the viewer who, in Azoulay's civil contract, is precisely the third party to that contract.

The project approaches archival material as something reshaped through use, circulation, and material process. What "reshaped through use" means in practice can be traced through a single image from Carried: found through search, saved, cropped in Photoshop, lightly adjusted for tone and contrast, converted to black and white, printed; placed beneath the fabric, transferred with medium and brush, left for a day, then washed the paper backing rubbed away by hand, and pressed flat with an iron; and in that washing and rubbing, part of the image might dissolve, fail to transfer, or fade. Each image in this archive carries some version of this itinerary.

3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA PROTEST IMAGES AND ANONYMOUS NARRATIVES

The images examined in this project function not only as archival material, but also as records of protest and collective experience. Drawn from different historical moments, they include photographs, screenshots, portraits, and everyday scenes that together form a dispersed record of women's presence within social and political struggles.

Across these images, the body often appears both visible and vulnerable within conditions of political and social control. Acts such as removing compulsory hijab, occupying public space, or confronting authority become forms of embodied resistance. At the same time, the body appears exposed to risk, revealing the conditions under which visibility becomes possible. Judith Butler argues that vulnerability should not be understood as the opposite of agency or as a weakness awaiting protection; in conditions of political resistance, deliberately exposing the body to risk — assembling in the street, appearing where appearance is forbidden

— is itself a mode of resistance, so that vulnerability and resistance become inseparable (Butler 2016). The women in these images enact precisely this: removing compulsory hijab in public is an act whose political force lies in the very exposure it entails.

A clear example of this tension is the hashtag “We Became What You Didn’t Want,” where women share images of themselves across time, often contrasting childhood images taken under imposed conditions with present-day self-representation. Polaroid emulsion lift gives this hashtag material form within the project, introducing an instability that is both temporal and physical, as the emulsion separates and is carefully transferred onto plexiglass before it settles. In *Before/After*, emulsion lifts are transferred onto small plexiglass surfaces, each holding two images simultaneously: a childhood photograph in which the subject wears compulsory hijab, and an image of the same person in adulthood, with clothing of their own choosing. These images are drawn from photographs shared publicly by Iranian women on social media, connected to this hashtag (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Two images shared on X under this hashtag.

The pairing consciously engages the ‘before and after’ visual language familiar from advertising, here repurposed to challenge rather than reinforce normative expectations: the ‘after’ image is not an improvement but an assertion of self-determination. Through the

transparency of the plexiglass, both images remain visible at once, layered and overlapping. The emulsion lift process itself introduces distortion and fragility; the photographic surface stretches, shifts, or partially separates during transfer, producing surfaces that are simultaneously delicate and visually unstable. Instead of correcting these conditions, I allow them to remain, trusting the process to shape how the images are finally encountered. When a transfer does not carry completely, when part of the image dissolves, or fades, or the weave of the fabric shows through, the image moves away from what it originally was; and set beside the others, it takes on a meaning it did not have alone.

Many of these images circulate without full context, without names, dates, locations, or the circumstances of their capture. Faces may be obscured, identities remain uncertain, and information is often incomplete. These conditions reflect both the instability of digital circulation and the risks surrounding visibility within systems of surveillance. In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault describes the archive as the law of what can be said, the system governing which statements survive and circulate (Foucault 1969, 129). State archives operate precisely as such a law. The digital flows through which these images move, however, cross national and institutional boundaries, so that no single law of what can be said governs them; yet, as discussed above, they are not lawless either — platform policies impose their own limits. What results is not freedom from the archive but a fragmentation of its authority.

Despite incomplete context, these images retain political and emotional force, not only for those who produced or shared them, but also for viewers who encounter them without access to their full histories. During moments of political crisis, social media platforms become important spaces for circulation and visibility. Through hashtags, reposting, and collective sharing, individual images move beyond private documentation and become part of broader public narratives.

Here, posting an image becomes both documentation and intervention, an act that challenges erasure. Even under restricted conditions, the persistence of image-sharing demonstrates the central role of visual media in contemporary forms of political expression.

Within this project, these images are not presented in their original form. Instead, they are transformed through material processes. The work does not reproduce explicit violence; it focuses on lives before and beyond moments of loss, and portraits, often shared by families, stand in place of graphic imagery (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The Photographs depict individuals killed in January 2026.

In some works, I chose not to use direct photographs of injured bodies even when such images were available, working instead with radiographic images and materially transformed versions of those photographs through cyanotype and transfer — a decision examined in section 4.2.

Alfredo Jaar[8] works with a similar restraint, limiting the direct visibility of violence so that the viewer encounters traces of loss and vulnerability without relying on graphic imagery. The images are materially reworked through physical intervention. The traces of the original

[8] Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996; see also *The Sound of Silence*, 2006.

images remain visible, but their meaning shifts through physical intervention and material transformation.

3.3 POOR IMAGES AND FRAGMENTED VISUAL MEMORY

Many of the images used in this project can be understood through Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image: low-resolution, degraded, and widely circulated visual material that exists outside traditional standards of photographic quality (Steyerl 2009). Many of these images are screenshots, reposted photographs, or compressed files that have lost detail through repeated circulation across digital platforms. Their condition is closely connected to the circumstances of capture and circulation, including mobile phone recording in unstable environments and repeated platform compression. In many cases, the images are produced quickly by non-professional individuals during protests, moments of urgency, or conditions of risk. In this project, these conditions affect how images behave when enlarged, transferred, printed, or exposed through different material processes.

The multiplicity of perspectives within these images is also significant. Each image reflects a particular viewpoint, device, and moment of recording. I often work with this condition by printing images at inconsistent scales, allowing differences in resolution, sharpness, and compression to remain visible across the surface. In some cases, personal photographs later reappear in memorial contexts following arrest, violence, disappearance, or death, shifting their meaning through circulation and public sharing.

I approach this fragmentation not symbolically but materially. In one process, for example, I transferred a low-resolution image onto plexiglass using cyanotype. Although the image initially appeared visible after exposure, parts of it dissolved during washing, leaving only partial traces behind. I left these dissolutions visible within the final work. This instability was not an isolated incident: producing multiple cyanotype prints under identical conditions, using the same materials and timing, I found that during washing some images survived while

others disappeared completely (Figure 7). The results were inconsistent in ways I could not fully control, showing how material instability emerges through process rather than intention.

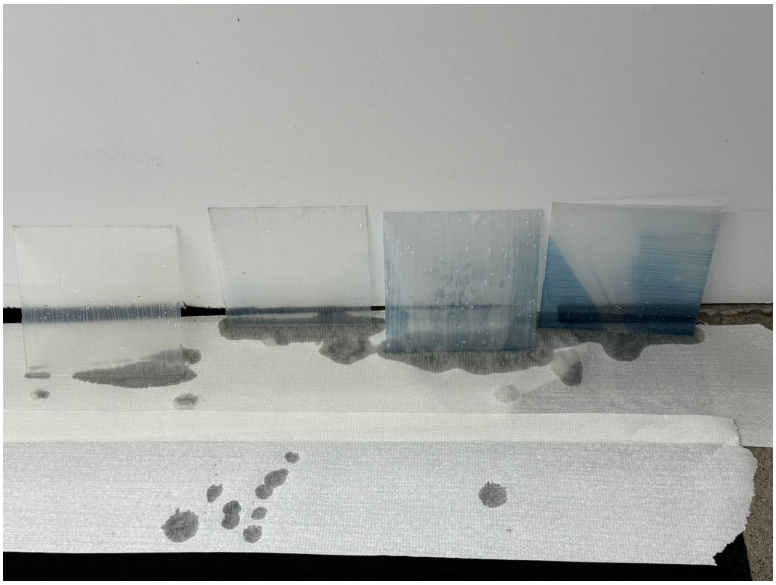


Figure 7. Cyanotype process on plexiglass after the emulsion was washed away.

My engagement with these images extends beyond collection and selection into transformation. Through cutting, layering, machine-sewn joins, and singed edges, the images are materially altered across surfaces such as fabric, plexiglass, paper, and emulsion transfers. These processes are deeply physical: guiding fabric panels through a sewing machine, brushing solution onto plexiglass, pressing paper pulp into the form of a clenched fist, washing prints by hand. Working in this way became a form of processing grief and anger through sustained bodily contact with materials, in contrast to the disembodied space of digital circulation where these images first emerged.

This project does not treat poor images as degraded versions of an original; it approaches them as materials shaped by urgency, circulation, vulnerability, and collective use (Steyerl 2009).

This condition also relates to Walter Benjamin's account of mechanical reproduction, in which the reproduced image loses its aura, the here-and-now of the original, its unique presence in place and time (Benjamin 2008, 220–221). Benjamin, however, does not simply mourn this loss; he recognizes in reproduction an emancipatory potential, freeing the image from ritual and opening it to new political functions. Steyerl's poor image is in many ways the continuation of this argument into digital circulation — the two theories are intricately tied. This project takes the same position: the distance from the original is not mourned as loss but approached as part of the image's material history, a condition that opens rather than forecloses new forms of encounter. A related insight comes from Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges: every image in this archive is a partial, located view, recorded from a particular body, in a particular moment of risk, and makes no claim to the view from nowhere (Haraway 1988).

3.4 ARCHIVAL AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES

The archival framework of this project is developed through processes of selection, organization, and material transformation that move between research and artistic interpretation. The images are drawn from different historical, social, and political moments following the 1979 revolution, with particular attention to events in which women are present, affected, or actively involved.

Instead of attempting a complete historical archive, the project adopts a selective methodology shaped by a conceptual focus on women's visibility, bodily autonomy, and resistance. Images were gathered from the platforms described in section 3.1 over an extended and ongoing period. This process had no fixed endpoint: new images continued to emerge months after initial searches, particularly in relation to ongoing events. Practical limitations also shaped the archive, accounts were deleted, images removed, and access to platforms restricted through state filtering, meaning that some materials disappeared before they could be collected.

Once collected, the images are organized into thematic groupings, including portraits of individuals who have lost their lives, protest graffiti, medical and radiographic imagery, screenshots from social media circulation, and photographs connected to specific political events. Among the sources of the radiographic images in this archive was the Instagram page of Dr. Keyvan Mirhadi, a page that functioned simultaneously as clandestine clinic, testimony, and archive — discussed further in section 4.2. Some images are grouped through visual similarities such as resolution, gesture, or cropping, while others are linked through shared historical context.

Prior to printing and transfer, only minimal digital adjustments are made, the itinerary traced in section 3.1. Transformation instead occurs through physical processes such as enlargement, cyanotype exposure, washing, cutting, layering, and transfer onto surfaces including fabric, plexiglass, paper, and ceramic. In some cases, the shift from screen-based circulation into physical material is enough to alter how the image is encountered.

Akram Zaatari's engagement with photographic archives offers a close parallel here: he treats them as incomplete, continuously shifting structures shaped through circulation, preservation, and omission. What makes such work art rather than documentation is that the archive itself becomes the material of the practice — Zaatari re-photographs, re-sequences, and exhibits found images so that the conditions of their survival, rather than their informational content, are what the viewer encounters. Allan Sekula's observation that archival systems are selective rather than neutral (Sekula 1986) is the critical premise of this move: once selection is understood as a form of authorship, arranging an archive becomes an artistic act. This project, however, does not claim objectivity. The archive is constructed through personal decisions regarding selection, sequencing, material treatment, and visibility. The archive brings together multiple and sometimes conflicting visual histories.

In this sense, the project functions as both an archival and artistic practice. Within this process, images are reorganized through material intervention rather than preserved as stable documents.

This process of selection, transformation, and intentional loss is what I call a poetic archive: not an archive organized around completeness or preservation, but one shaped through material process and what survives each act of alteration.

3.4.1 THE POETIC ARCHIVE: AGAINST THE COUNTER-ARCHIVE

The distinction among these three archival layers must be made more precise. The official archive in the Islamic Republic is selective and censorial: it removes whatever does not conform to the official narrative. The counter-archive operates outside this control, but "outside" carries a meaning in the Iranian context that exceeds any institutional definition. For the Iranian citizen, for whom access to Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram is blocked, presence on these platforms is itself an act of civil disobedience: one buys a VPN whose very possession is illegal, in order to share an image that contradicts the will of the state. For an Iranian woman, a profile photograph without compulsory hijab is an act before it is an image. These same platforms in most of the world, spaces for sharing leisure and the everyday — become, at historical turning points, sites of testimony and the demand for justice. Every citizen now carries a camera, recording and circulating evidence of state violence; and it is precisely for this reason that, following the mass killings of 8 and 9 January 2026, the state cut the country's internet entirely, so that the scale of the repression would remain hidden. The price of recording and sharing such moments is severe: Masoud Piyahu, who filmed the protester seated before security forces on Tehran's Jomhuri Street, an image that became known as "Tehran's Tank Man" (Figure 8), was sentenced to ten years in prison; and Hesam Alaeddin, detained over the alleged use of satellite internet during the blackout, was beaten to death by state agents in his own home; a death the authorities then concealed for weeks, treating him as a living detainee

until his family was told to collect his body. The counter-archive, for all its limitations including platform content policies that do not permit every image to circulate is closer to reality than any state archive; and for precisely this reason, it is the most dangerous thing a citizen can make. The poetic archive is distinct from both, and does not compete with either for custody of the document. Where the official archive preserves in order to authorize, and the counter-archive in order to contradict, the poetic archive begins after both — with what circulation and material process have already done to the image. It is this third position, developed through the remainder of this section, that the project claims as its own.



Figure 8. "Tehran's Tank Man". 2025. Video still by Masoud Piyahu.

But the counter-archive has a fragility of its own: it gets lost, and it gets deleted. This project experienced that fragility directly. I had gathered the before/after image pairs from the hashtag “We Became What You Didn’t Want” over two years; yet while preparing my defence presentation, I discovered that the hashtag was no longer searchable on X, under the platform’s newer policies, hashtags expire and are removed after several years. The archive this project has built has now outlived its own source (Figure 9). The same inequality is visible across time:

far fewer images survive from events that took place when access to social media was more limited and phone cameras weaker — the Green Movement, the attacks on the university dormitories. The counter-archive depends on an infrastructure that can withdraw it at any moment.



Figure 9. Screenshot of the hashtag page that was removed from X platform.

The poetic archive begins here as a response to the question of what can be done when the counter-archive is itself subject to disappearance. What the poetic archive makes possible, and the counter-archive cannot, is the removal of the image from platform time, the tempo imposed by the platforms themselves, in which an image must appear quickly, circulate briefly, and then be superseded or deleted: from speed, from expiry, from the logic of the feed.

In this the poetic archive exceeds the archive's normative documentary function. A conventional archive answers the question of what happened; it holds the document as evidence, and its value depends on that document remaining stable and legible. The poetic archive does not abandon that function — the images it holds still testify — but it adds one the documentary archive cannot perform: it makes the history of the image's own survival available to be felt rather than read. It is therefore open-ended by construction: it has no complete state against which it could be measured, no correct order, and no final interpretation. Each viewer completes it differently, and it remains open to further addition. The materialized image on fabric, plexiglass, ceramic is no longer subject to any corporation's deletion policies; it has been slowed, given presence in space, brought before the viewer's body. And what the poetic

archive holds that a conventional archive cannot is instability itself: the conventional archive preserves the document in a fixed state and treats the marks of circulation and erosion as damage; here, the traces of being passed from hand to hand — compression, fading, loss, and the empty spaces for those of whom no image remains — are part of the content itself. The poetic archive preserves what has survived each transformation, together with the marks of that transformation; within it, loss is not an accident but a meaning.

In every work, the image ends at some distance from what it was. The emulsion lifts, thin and fragile, tore or deformed in transfer, losing their precise rectangular edges; in *Witnessed*, the acid-attack cyanotypes, washing carried away most of some images, leaving a faint trace, and produced across the series a tonal gradation from deep blue to nearly nothing, that no single image was designed to hold.

The viewer encounters these materials within an installation environment shaped by scale, layering, transparency, and physical movement through space. The work does not present historical information directly; it invites viewers to navigate partial images, obscured surfaces, and fragmented visual relationships through embodied and spatial experience.

Within this project, archiving occurs through selection, transfer, and material alteration rather than preservation alone. The resulting installation brings together images shaped by circulation, loss, and physical transformation. Each body of work is accompanied by a brief statement that provides context.

CHAPTER 4: BODY, MEMORY, AND TRAUMA

4.1 THE BODY AS SITE OF MEMORY

In this project, the body is approached through processes of contact, scanning, and material transformation not as a subject of representation, but as something shaped through lived experience, visibility, and systems of control. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, the body is continuously shaped through social and political conditions rather than existing as a stable or neutral form (Grosz 1994). This understanding informs my approach to the body as something partial, shifting, and materially constructed.

My understanding of the body is also shaped by personal experience. Living with multiple sclerosis, I have experienced moments of blurred and unstable vision that altered my relationship to perception and visibility. These moments made the act of seeing feel unreliable and physically uncertain, influencing how I approach distortion, instability, and bodily fragmentation within the work. This experience gives the project a personal and embodied stake in questions of unstable perception: the instability that the work seeks to represent is not only conceptual or political, but grounded in the lived uncertainty of perception itself. The question of what is visible, what dissolves, and what remains only partially legible carries personal resonance that extends through the material decisions made throughout the project.

Within the Iranian context, the body, particularly the female body, is subject to continuous regulation through hijab, surveillance, and social expectations. These forms of control do not simply affect appearance; they shape how women move through public space, monitor bodily presence, and negotiate visibility within everyday life.

The use of a portable scanner in this project emerges from these conditions. Unlike a camera, which captures the body from a distance, the scanner requires direct proximity and physical contact. Even so, the scanner does not abolish distance: a plane of glass remains between the sensor and the skin. What changes is not that distance disappears but where it falls

— no longer between a photographer and a subject, but within the body being recorded. Moving the scanner across different areas of my own skin, the body is recorded gradually and in sections rather than within a single frame. Movement during scanning can stretch, blur, compress, or partially erase parts of the image (Figure 10). These distortions are not treated as technical mistakes but retained as part of the work's material process. This process carries particular significance within the context of this research: the female body in Iran has historically been subject to censorship, regulation, and erasure from public visibility. Scanning my own body becomes a quiet act of making visible what has been systematically concealed. The resulting images are printed at varying scales and are encountered physically within the installation space, allowing viewers to move among them and engage with the work through proximity and bodily presence.

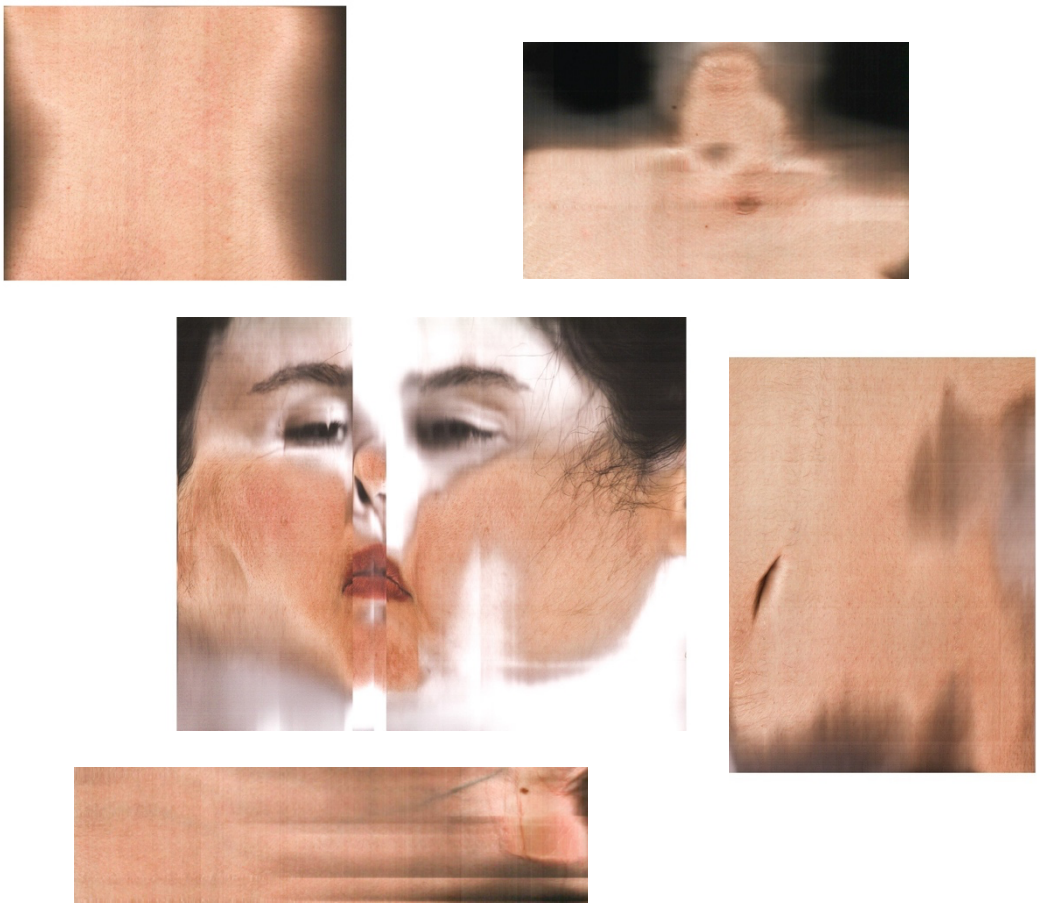


Figure 10. Body scans made with a portable scanner, 2026. Details from the material of *Archive of the Body*.

Where does my own body; the subject of the scan, the instrument of its capture, and the site of its personal involvement enter an archive largely composed of others' images? This question is addressed further in the Positionality discussion of Chapter 5.

4.2 FRAGMENTATION, ABSENCE, AND TRACE

Fragmentation operates in this project through both image selection and material process. Bodies rarely appear as complete figures. Instead, images are cropped, partially transferred, enlarged beyond their original resolution, or interrupted through washing, layering, and scanning processes. As a result, the body often appears in sections rather than as a unified form.

In this context, absence is produced materially rather than symbolically. Parts of the image may disappear through cyanotype washing, remain obscured beneath layers of fabric or plexiglass, or become partially unreadable through transfer and enlargement processes. What remains hidden or incomplete becomes part of how the image is experienced.

Mendieta's relevance to this project is double. Her Silueta[9] works locate the body in trace and imprint rather than depiction; presence made through absence, which parallels this project's approach to the fragmented body. But Mendieta also worked from displacement: exiled from Cuba as a child, her earth-body works enacted a return to ground from which she had been severed. That position — making the absent body present, from a distance that cannot be crossed — resonates directly with the conditions of this project.

A similar tension between visibility and erasure operates within this project. Instead of presenting the body as fully accessible, the work often requires viewers to navigate partial images, obscured surfaces, and interrupted visual information. In some cases, viewers encounter only fragments of faces, gestures, or bodily surfaces without access to complete narratives.

[9]Ana Mendieta, Silueta Series, 1973–1980.

The use of found and circulated images further reinforces these conditions. Many of the source images already exist in incomplete forms: screenshots, compressed files, cropped photographs, or reposted images detached from their original contexts. During material processes such as transfer, layering, and scratching, these conditions are not corrected but intensified.

One concern throughout the project is the representation of violence and the ethics of looking. Susan Sontag argues that repeated exposure to images of suffering can produce desensitization rather than understanding (Sontag 2003), a dynamic that operates differently depending on the viewer's proximity to the violence depicted. For those living within conditions of ongoing political repression, a higher threshold of exposure does not indicate indifference but reflects the psychological weight of sustained trauma. This tension informs my approach to images related to injury, loss, and political violence.

Sontag in fact makes two distinct arguments: that repeated exposure dulls response, and that the deeper problem lies not in images but in the political conditions that produce the suffering they show. This project responds to both, but differently. The first shapes its formal strategy: slowing, layering, and withholding, so that the image cannot be consumed at a glance. The second shapes its archival strategy: the images are never presented as isolated evidence of violence, but embedded within an account of the systems, censorship, regulation, erasure that produced both the violence and the conditions of its visibility.

This strategy reflects an attempt to approach violence without relying on graphic spectacle. The decision to work with radiographic imagery rather than explicit photographs of injured bodies was an ethical decision before it was an aesthetic one. These radiographic images came from several sources: some from an anonymized set shared, at my request, by a radiologist friend, body scans only, stripped of all identifying information and others from publicly circulated material on social media. One source in particular illustrates the conditions

under which such images came into circulation: the Instagram page of Dr. Keyvan Mirhadi ("Dr. Kay"),[10] an Iranian physician based outside Iran, to whom wounded protesters unable to go to hospitals, where they risked arrest or death, sent photographs of their injuries alongside their privately-taken X-rays, asking for his assessment. In a single post, the photograph of the open wound and the radiograph of the same body often appear side by side; Instagram itself flags the former as sensitive content and hides it behind a blur, while the latter circulates freely (Figure 11).

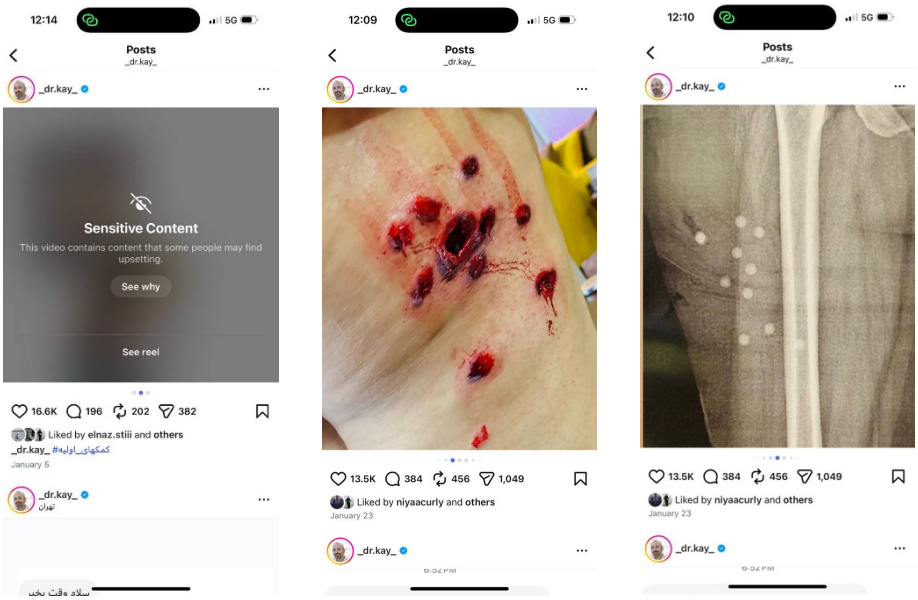


Figure 11. Screenshots taken from Dr. Kay's Instagram page.

My choice, then, was a choice between two registers of the same injury, and I chose the one that testifies without spectacle. The radiograph shows the harm without the flesh: pellets lodged in a leg appear as quiet white circles, evidence stripped of gore. Only after this refusal came the visual possibilities: the tonal affinity between the radiograph and the cyanotype, the way both render the body in light and shadow on a blue-toned surface. That the result carries

[10] Dr. Keyvan Mirhadi, Instagram page (@dr.kay), accessed 2025–2026. instagram.com/dr.kay

beauty produces a tension between what the surface offers and what it holds, and that tension is deliberate: it is what slows the viewer down.

In this sense, the project relates to Alfredo Jaar's critique of violent representation, where limiting direct visibility becomes a way of resisting the passive consumption of suffering.[11] The encounter the work seeks is not one of pity but of recognition. In works that bring together portraits of women killed during the protests, ordinary photographs, selfies, images shared by families, the viewer first meets a face, a smile, a life. The violence is not shown but becomes present in what the viewer comes to understand. This is closer to Jaar's strategy: not the image of death, but the weight of a life.

4.2.1 MEMORIAL

In this project, memorialization takes shape not as a subject but as an act. I use the term deliberately. Remembrance is interior and private, something a person carries; commemoration is public and sanctioned, performed on dates a state or a community agrees upon; memorialization is the making of a form that holds the dead in shared view when no such sanction exists. For the women in these images there is no permitted commemoration, the state that killed them administers the calendar, and private remembrance, however deep, disappears with those who carry it. Memorialization is what remains available: to give the dead a material place, made by hand, that others can stand before. Portraits of women who lost their lives are transferred onto fabric; radiographic images of their injured bodies appear in *What the Body Remembers*, a cyanotype series on plexiglass, and victims of acid attacks in *Witnessed*, the second cyanotype series. These images come from a digital environment in which they have been shared and reshared countless times, and where their likely fate is deletion, gradual

[11] Alfredo Jaar's works, including *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996) and *The Sound of Silence* (2006), address the ethics of representing violence through strategies of visual restraint and mediated visibility.

forgetting, or deliberate censorship within state structures. Materializing them — moving them from unstable digital circulation onto fabric, plexiglass, and pigment; is an attempt to keep their memory alive, and a social and ethical responsibility I feel toward them.

This absence is not abstract: their families face obstacles even in holding mourning ceremonies, pressured into brief, quiet family gatherings, and some of the dead have been buried in remote locations, in anonymity, and in some cases in mass graves. Under these conditions, even attending such a ceremony is itself a political act, an open gesture of opposition to the state. Remembrance, long before it reaches the space of art, has already become an act of resistance within everyday life.

The installation also departs from the logic of official memorials. A gravestone is a solitary monument; here, those who were present in a shared event are placed alongside one another, preserving their collective experience within the arrangement. Some spaces are deliberately left empty; for those who remain anonymous: among the dead were women whose bodies lay unclaimed in morgues for days, their names and identities never established.

A parallel can be drawn with Christian Boltanski's memorial installations, which sometimes use anonymous photographs, repetition, and spatial arrangement to give emotional weight to absence.

The fragility of these memorial works — *Carried* above all, and the two cyanotype series — is also deliberate. Unlike stone and bronze, which insist on permanence, these images fade, dissolve, and remain materially incomplete: the transfers carry only part of what was printed, the cyanotypes hold only what the wash left behind, and one panel holds no image at all. This incompleteness is not a shortfall in execution but the visible record of what each process took away, a continuation of the logic of the poetic archive. What the material removes from an image is not subtracted from its meaning but added to it, so that what remains carries not only a face but the history of its own disappearance: the protests and

killings these images come from, and the deletions and forgettings they have passed through since.

4.3 MATERIALITY, PROCESS, AND EMBODIED IMAGE

The methodology of this project is grounded in a practice-based approach that moves between research, image collection, printing, transfer, and material experimentation. The work does not follow a linear sequence; it develops through repeated processes of testing, interruption, failure, and reconstruction. The project begins with images gathered from digital circulation, as described in Chapter 3, which are printed onto transparency film or paper and transferred onto materials such as fabric, plexiglass, ceramic, and photographic surfaces. At the core of this approach is a movement from image as representation toward image as process: the image is not treated as fixed visual information, but as something transformed through contact, pressure, repetition, erosion, and handling. This methodology differs from appropriation practices that rely primarily on the direct reuse of images with minimal material alteration; my approach involves sustained physical engagement with the image itself.

Material processes are central to this project, extending the image beyond screen-based representation into physical and tactile form. Techniques such as cyanotype, photo transfer, machine sewing, singeing, layering, and hand-pressed paper pulp involve direct bodily interaction with materials and surfaces that cannot be fully standardized or repeated. Images may partially dissolve, fade, crack, or fail to fully transfer, and these conditions are retained, not corrected, becoming evidence of pressure, interruption, and repeated handling. Through this sustained physical engagement, the image becomes inseparable from its material condition.

Sasha Huber's[12] physically forceful processes influenced my consideration of the body, and specifically the Iranian women's bodies at the centre of this project, not only as represented subject matter, but also as something engaged through labour, pressure, and repeated action.

The materials used throughout the project also shape how the images are encountered physically. Fabric absorbs and softens transferred images; plexiglass creates reflective and transparent layers; ceramic records pressure, fingerprints, and bodily gesture through moulding and handling. These materials do not simply support the image but actively alter how it appears and is experienced.

The process of image transfer involved sustained experimentation across multiple materials and methods. Working with acetone, glass medium, alcohol, and mat medium, I tested each material's capacity to carry the printed image onto fabric and plexiglass. Acetone produced transfers that were too faint to retain visual presence, while glass medium created surfaces that were difficult to work with in subsequent layering processes. Through repeated testing, mat medium emerged as the most responsive material for fabric transfers, allowing the image to adhere while still absorbing unevenly into the textile surface. These decisions were not made in advance but developed through direct material engagement, where each failed attempt redirected the process toward new possibilities. The resulting transfers retained enough clarity to carry the image while remaining visibly imperfect, present but not fixed, legible but not complete. This felt right: the material had found its own threshold between visibility and loss.

The use of plexiglass introduces another layer of complexity. Its transparent surface allows images to be viewed from both sides, creating overlapping visual fields. When multiple

[12]Sasha Huber's practice often employs physically repetitive and forceful processes to address histories of violence, colonialism, and bodily inscription.

layers are combined, the image becomes spatial rather than flat. Overlapping images shift depending on light, transparency, and viewer position.

Cyanotype plays a particularly significant role through its distinctive blue tone. In this project, this blue is connected visually and culturally to what is often referred to as Persian blue[13]. Suspended throughout the installation space, these works create tension between visual beauty and bodily violence.

Before anything else, this blue is a reminder: of the blue pools in the courtyards of houses, the interior domes of mosques, and the tilework of Isfahan. The colour seems woven into the fabric of the culture I grew up in, and the connection is not only a matter of feeling. Ultramarine, the pigment ground from lapis lazuli, came from the mines of Badakhshan — territory that lay within the Iranian world throughout the period in question, and was absorbed into the modern state of Afghanistan only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — and it was used in Persian miniature painting for centuries. In Iranian architecture, most visibly in the tiled domes of mosques, blue often signifies the meeting of earth and sky, and is associated with transcendence and the sacred. Cyanotype, although chemically a different pigment (Prussian blue, not lapis lazuli), carries something of that resonance onto the surface; and the installation deliberately displaces it: on this sky-blue, it is not ascension but wounded bodies that come to rest. A colour that once pointed upward now holds the earth, and what has passed upon it, here.

This embrace of material imperfection finds a precedent in Sally Mann's own practice: her prints, made through historical processes prone to streaking, dust, and chemical accident, are not perfect, and she does not pursue perfection; she welcomes what the process introduces.

[13] Prussian blue (iron (III) hexacyanoferrate) is the pigment produced through the cyanotype process, first introduced in the nineteenth century. It is chemically distinct from the mineral blues of Persian tilework and manuscript painting, though tonally close to them. See: Nikki R. Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution (2003); Babak Rahimi, Islamic Modernism and the Re-enchantment of the Sacred (2015).

The portable scanner extends this engagement directly to the body, as discussed in section 4.1. Polaroid emulsion lift introduces a related form of material instability, discussed in section 3.2 in relation to the before/after image pairs.

Ceramic elements are produced through hand-pressing and direct manipulation of clay. Forms such as clenched fists are created through pressure and repetition (Figure 12 and 13), emphasizing physical force and bodily engagement.

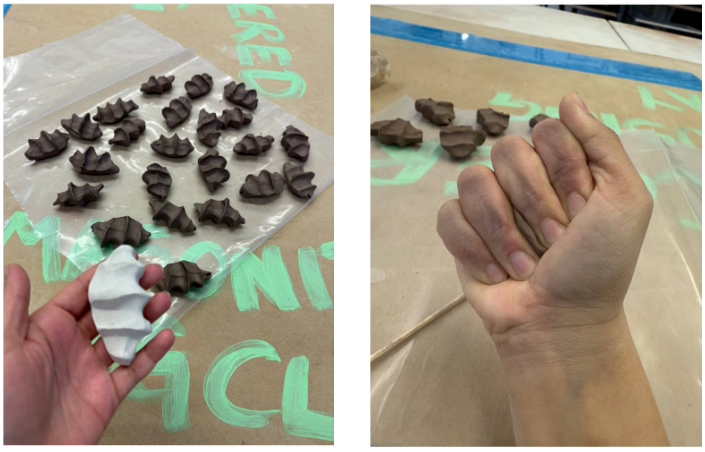


Figure 12. Ceramic clenched fists.

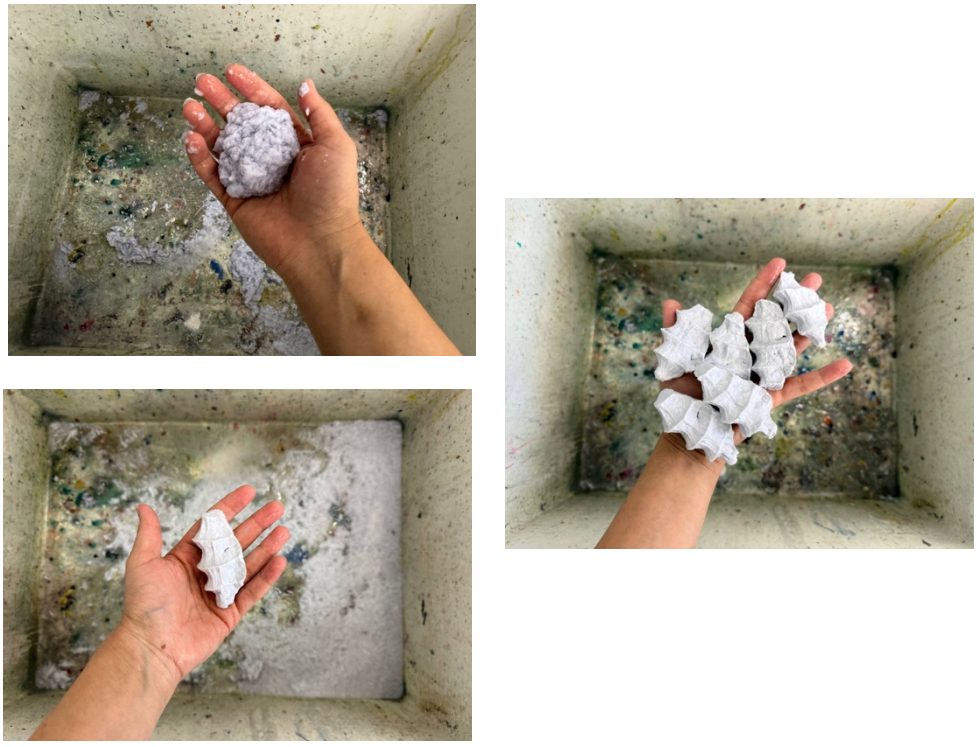


Figure 13. Paper-pulp clenched fists.

Other surfaces carry the direct trace of touch, fingerprints, the pressure of a palm, marks left by a fingernail, intentionally disrupting the smoothness of the material through scratching, piercing, or imprinting. One tile was split in two and re-joined from behind; the break remains visible on its face; a repair that does not conceal the wound. These pieces are left in a raw state, without refinement or polishing, maintaining a direct connection to the act of making. Of the ceramic elements, the eight square pieces of *Touch* were shown in the final exhibition on a horizontal plinth; the ceramic fists, however, were ultimately not exhibited, only their paper counterparts (*Residue*) entered the installation. This choice, too, follows the logic of the poetic archive: an archive is formed not only by what is made, but by what is chosen to be seen. Setting a piece aside is not its failure; it is another layer of the same process of selection, transformation, and survival that this project names as archiving.

Gathered begins with an object I learned to make in childhood: a decorative hanging made by winding colourful yarn around crossed wood, working arm by arm outward from the centre; an object made especially among the nomadic communities of western Iran and hung on the walls of homes to ward off the evil eye; a keeper of the house against harm. Such a hanging was on the wall of my own childhood home (Figure 14); examples of such hangings are shown in Figure 15. In this project, I wound them in black: in memory of those killed, and in the colour of the grief I carried. The object of protection became an object of mourning, for those who were not protected. Making these pieces was a meditative and healing process — as if, in the repetition of the hand's movement, I was grieving. A number of the pieces were made by members of the Iranian community and by my friends (Figure 16), and in the exhibition, black yarn and wood were placed beside the installation so that any visitor could make and add a piece. A ritual that is difficult and dangerous to hold in Iran — collective mourning — was

remade here, collectively, on the gallery floor; and the work, like the archive itself, remained open: it is not yet finished.



Figure 14. Childhood wall hanging, family photograph.



Figure 15. Examples of nomadic evil-eye objects.
Source: Anonymous Photograph, online archive, accessed December 02, 2025.



Figure 16. Creating the artwork *Gathered*

A related question concerned when a work could be considered complete. Within this project, completion was understood not as a fixed endpoint but as a threshold, a moment when the work seemed sufficient for this stage of the research. Instead of continuing to refine or resolve each piece, I recognized a point at which further intervention would work against the material instability the project sought to maintain. In this sense, incompleteness was not a limitation but a condition the work needed to preserve.

These studio decisions collectively constitute a form of poetic archiving. Choosing to retain a partially dissolved print, an unevenly transferred image, or a cracked ceramic surface is not a matter of accepting failure, but of recognizing that the material process itself produces meaning. What remains after each process, the trace, the partial image, the altered surface, becomes the archive. Not a record of what was, but of what the material allowed to survive. In this sense, the methodology is not only conceptual but materially embodied.

Knowledge emerges through repeated processes of handling, transferring, damaging, layering, and reconstructing images across different surfaces and materials.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION / POSTSCRIPT

5.1 ON THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition *What Remains* took place in June 2026 at the Penny Gallery, University of Lethbridge, and its installation was itself the final stage of the project's material process. The space imposed its own conditions, and the project, faithful to its own logic, worked with them rather than against them.

The gallery's restrictions did not permit anything to be hung from the ceiling; my original mental image — the radiographic cyanotypes suspended in air — had to be rethought. The forty-nine plexiglass pieces of *What the Body Remembers* were instead mounted on the wall, each with four nails, at varying depths of two, three, and three and a half inches (Figure 17). The choice of nails was deliberate: hammering into the wall, puncturing and damaging its surface, was more consistent with the logic of the work, images formed through damage; than clean shelving or polished display hardware would have been. And out of this forced solution came something unforeseen: pieces closer to the wall read darker, those further out lighter, producing shifting tonalities of colour and shadow; the blue reflections cast onto the gallery floor created a light I had not imagined before installation. Work that had been made over months in the studio received its final layer from the space itself.

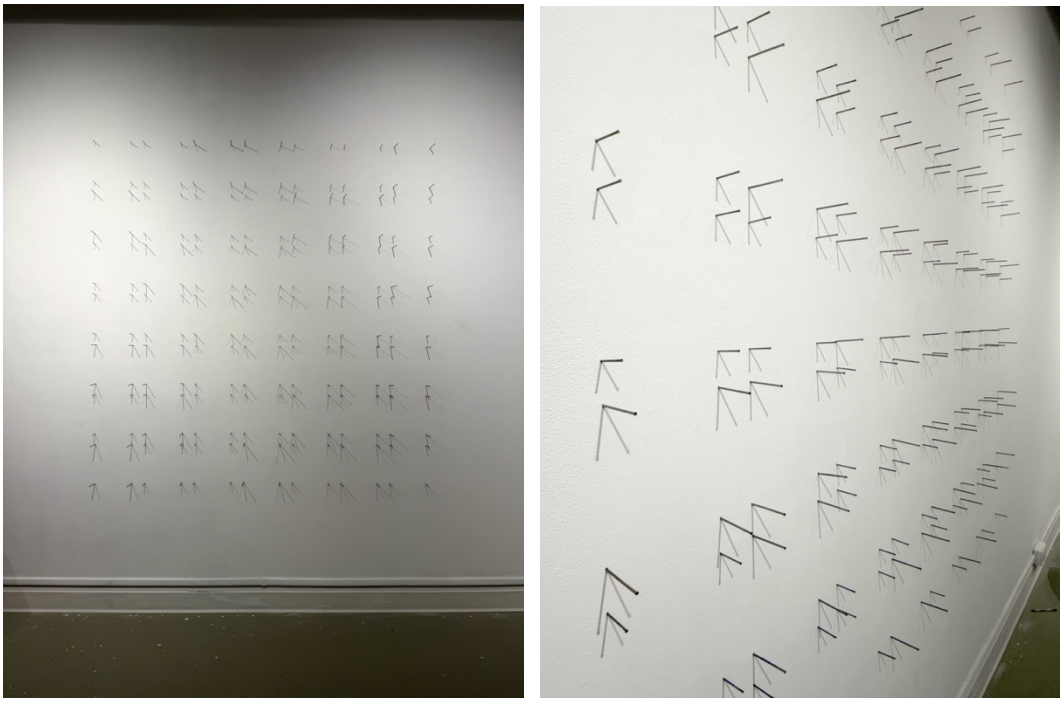


Figure 17. Exhibition wall, during installation.

Carried, the white fabric, was suspended from the wall with invisible fishing line; a solution planned in advance, but the decision to gather its trailing length on the floor, loosely and parallel to the wall, was made in the exhibition itself. The paper fists of *Residue* were placed on a small plinth behind the fabric, so that their relationship to that piece could be read through physical proximity.

The greatest reversal occurred with *Archive of the Body*. The original intention had been to print the scans of my body at life-size and mount them on the wall, and to open the exhibition with them. After spending time in the space, I arrived at a different decision: I placed the scans inside white folders and used the folders themselves as screens, projecting the slideshow onto them on the gallery's end wall. The folders remained open and accessible, so that visitors could leaf through them. Watching this gradual discovery became part of the work: in the semi-darkness, visitors at first did not know what they were looking at; they approached, and found that the folders held photographs.

The first day of the exhibition was the day of my defence. A question I had carried for a long time was what a largely Canadian audience, without a statement, would make of these works; and I saw that they made something of them. I told visitors they could touch whatever they wished. I watched people be moved; some became emotional on recognizing the pellet wounds, the scarred faces of acid attack survivors, the faces of the dead. On another day the exhibition was open to the public, and most visitors came from the Iranian community: they spoke of their own memories and hardships, of how deeply they understood these images; some stood before the slideshow for half an hour, watching the sequence several times over. And again, and again I heard: how good it is that we keep their memory alive. If this project is, as I have argued, an act of memorialization, those words were its measure.

The space taught its own lessons as well: pieces that had loomed large in my mind sat smaller than I expected within the gallery's scale, and I learned that every space carries a different potential that shapes the final work; an experience that will carry into future exhibitions.

And the end of the exhibition was not the end of the work: taking down the installation, pulling the nails, repairing the walls and repainting them, these too, in a way I had not anticipated, became part of the work itself. I had driven my anger into the nails with a hammer; I had exhibited the work; and at the end, I repaired the damaged surface with my own hands. The repainted wall is smooth now (Figure 18), but the holes are still there beneath the fresh layer, unseen, and remaining. The exhibition ended by the same logic through which the entire project had been made.

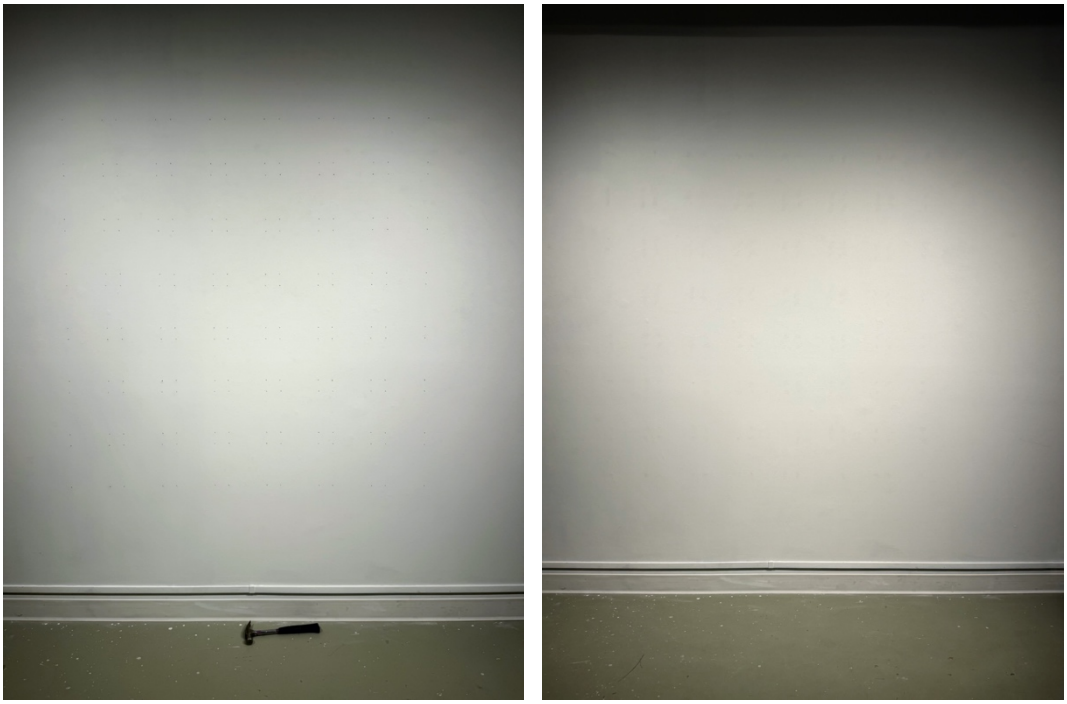


Figure 18. Left: wall with nail holes / Right: Repainted wall

5.2 WRITING ON UNSTABLE GROUND

This research was written on ground that shook throughout the writing. The project began in the shadow of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and the killing of Mahsa Amini; and in the final weeks before the defence, it reached a period this text can no longer leave unnamed: the nationwide protests that began in December 2025, the massacres of 8 and 9 January 2026 that left thousands of dead, and the total internet shutdown imposed to conceal their scale. If the political situation of Iran has remained largely in the background of the body of this text, the reason was not indifference: embargoing this support paper, as a security precaution, was once an option in my mind. The events of January removed that option: thousands of people have been killed, and I should worry about whether I can return? I take my position openly and clearly, whatever the risk, and I accept the consequences. This postscript is the record of that decision.

What this thesis argues about the archive was confirmed, in the bitterest way, within this same interval: the hashtag whose archive I had built expired; the man who recorded the most iconic image of this period was sentenced to ten years in prison; and the internet — the very ground from which every image in this project came went dark for months. A project about the fragility of the counter-archive witnessed that fragility before it was finished.

5.3 POSITIONALITY

Of the names that might be given to my position — witness, participant, exile — none is precise on its own. I left Iran less than two years ago and have not, for a moment, considered myself separate from it; I have studied, lived, and worked here, but my mind has remained there; and I do not believe the passage of time will change this. If migration gave me a critical distance for this research — the room to look again at what I had lived inside — it gave me no emotional distance from it. What it truly gave me was freedom: had I been in Iran, I could not have made these works, could not have exhibited them, could not have spoken about them. I have used that freedom for precisely what this project set out to do, to share these concerns with a new audience, and to offer an image I believe comes closer to reality: a reading I hold independent both of the state's official narrative and of the frameworks of media outside Iran.

This position is not without cost; the least of it is that I cannot return to my country, where the people I love live, and which I love. Nor is it passive: during this same period, I have run the Iranian students' club at the University of Lethbridge, organized memorial gatherings, and spoken with local media about recent events in Iran; and in a silent protest, tape over my mouth, a placard about the situation in Iran in my hands, and the national flag of Iran; I stood for three hours in the cold outside the Casa gallery in Lethbridge, with the aim of raising awareness. I have done here what many artists inside Iran cannot; and I have tried to use my freedom on their behalf — to be their voice, and to enter into dialogue with the Canadian art context, as a

multicultural and immigrant-receiving country, a dialogue I am confident moves in both directions.

And finally, my own body. In *Archive of the Body*, the scans of my body were mounted on the wall, and images of women in the movements that followed the revolution were projected onto them. This arrangement is my answer to a question present throughout this thesis: where does my body become part of this archive? I am a living witness of those events; I have myself lived through violence, censorship, and inequality, and I carry all of it in my mind, my body, and my memory. The images of those women fall on my scanned skin because there is nowhere else for them to fall. And this experience is not solitary: at the exhibition, an Iranian visitor stood before the ceramic pieces of *Touch* and said that had she been given clay, she would have released the same rage in the same way. Shared feeling is the most precise description I have of this archive.

Taken together, these influences inform a practice that moves between archive, installation, and material process, one rooted in a specific historical and political context: the lives of Iranian women following the 1979 revolution, the digital circulation of protest imagery, and my own position as an Iranian woman artist working from within and across these realities. The project ultimately approaches artistic practice itself as a form of archiving: not through preservation or completeness, but through transformation, selection, and the traces that remain after images pass through physical and material change.

CONCLUSION

This thesis asked how digitally circulated and fragmented images related to Iranian women could be transformed into spatial works that engage memory and bodily experience without reproducing violence as spectacle. The answer it arrived at was not a formula but a name: the poetic archive — an archive that holds not the document but what the document became, and holds it precisely because of what it lost along the way.

What remains, then, is not the image as it was, but what survived its passage — through screens, through hands, through water and light and pressure — together with the marks of that passage. And if the exhibition confirmed anything, it is that this surviving trace is enough: enough to be recognized, enough to be touched, enough to keep a memory alive that the state has tried to erase. The archive is not finished; like *Gathered* on the gallery floor, it remains open.

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APPENDIX: DOCUMENTATION OF EXHIBITION

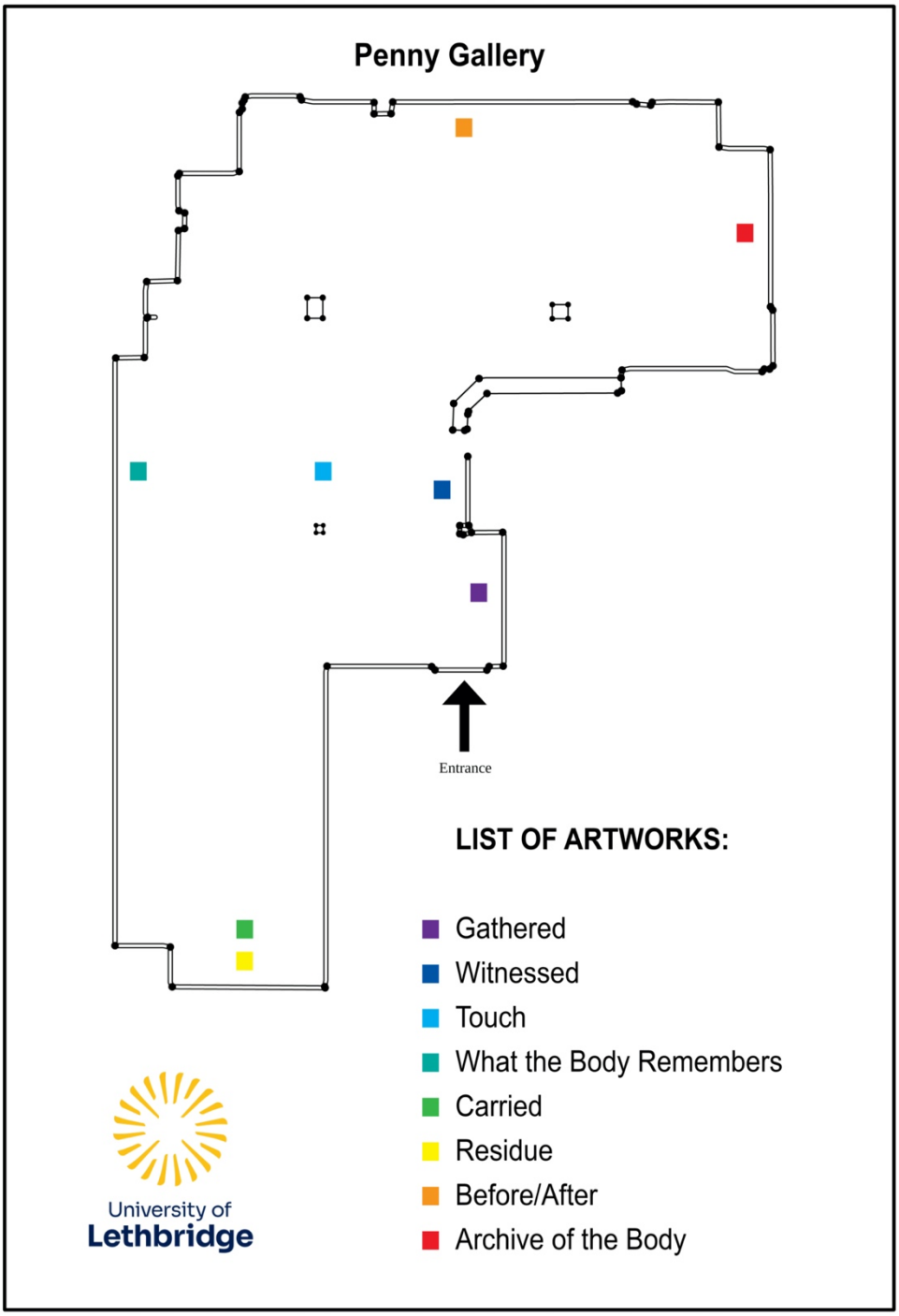


Figure 19. *What Remains*. Gallery floor plan, 2026.



Figure 20. *What Remains*, Gallery view. 2026.

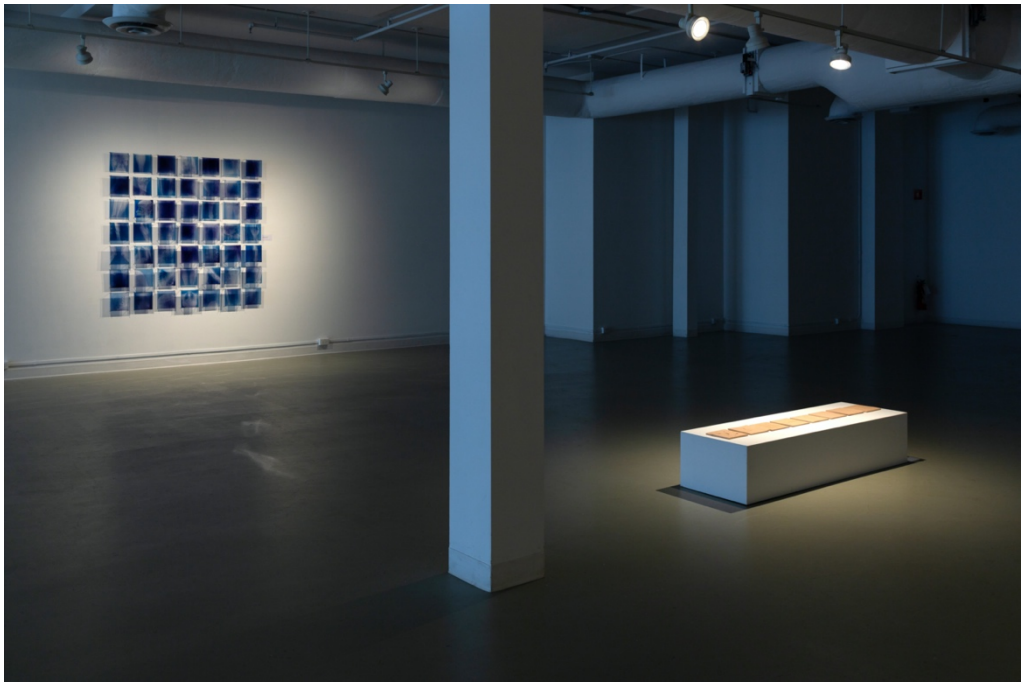


Figure 21. *What Remains*, Gallery view. 2026.



Figure 22. *What Remains*, Gallery view. 2026.



Figure 23. *What Remains*, Gallery view. 2026.



Figure 24. *Carried*, 2026.



Figure 25. *Carried*, (Details), 2026.



Figure 26. *Carried*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 27. *Residue*, 2026.





Figure 28. *Residue*, 2026.



Figure 29. *Residue*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 30. *Residue*, (Detail), 2026.

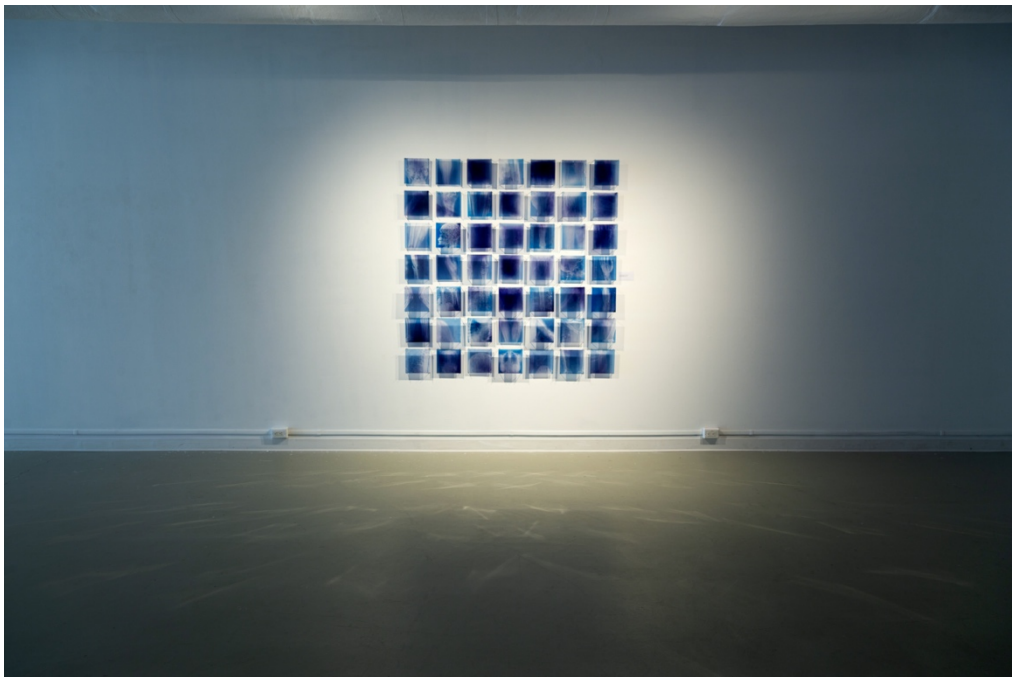


Figure 31. *What the Body Remembers*, 2026.

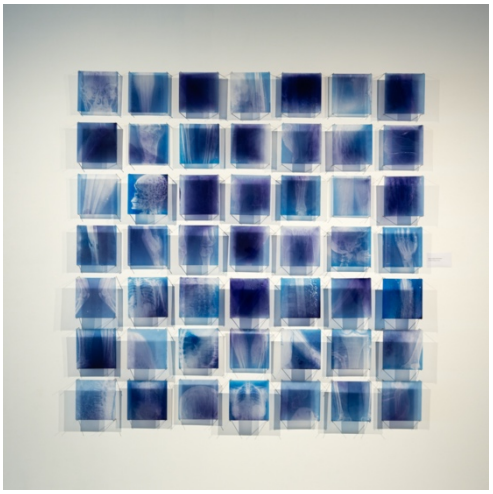




Figure 32. *What the Body Remembers*, 2026.



Figure 33. *What the Body Remembers*, (Detail), 2026.

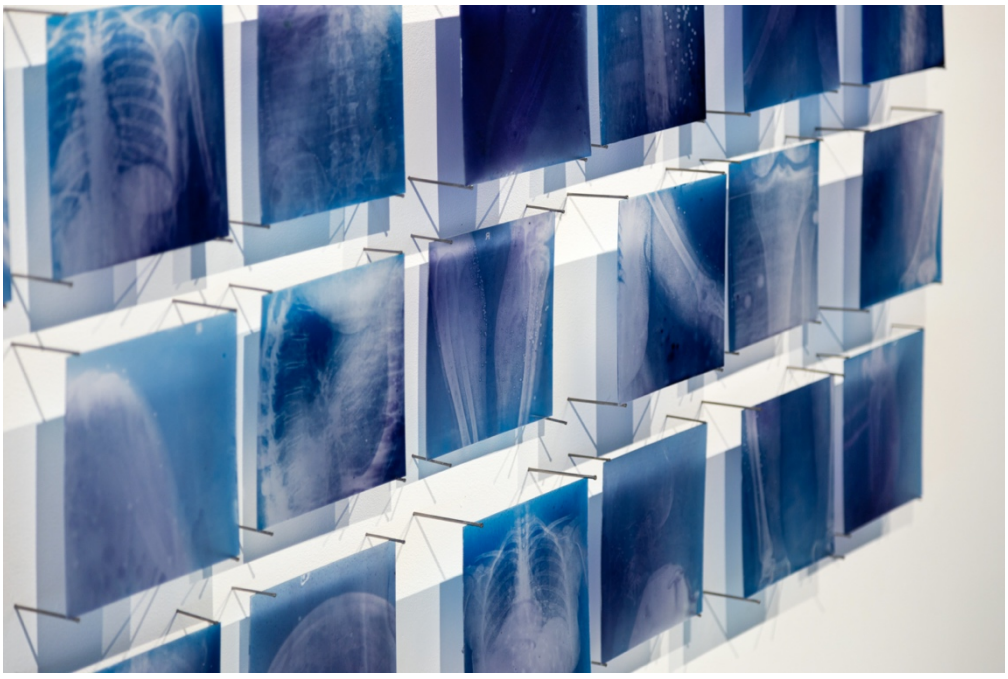


Figure 34. *What the Body Remembers*, (Detail), 2026.

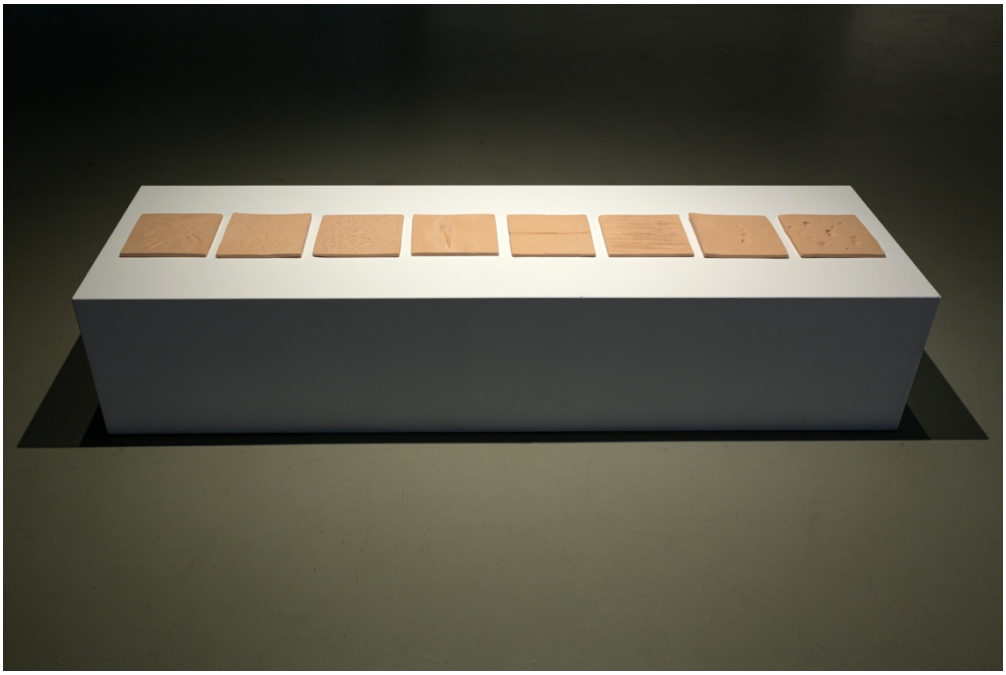


Figure 35. *Touch*, 2026.



Figure 36. *Touch*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 37. *Gathered*, 2026.

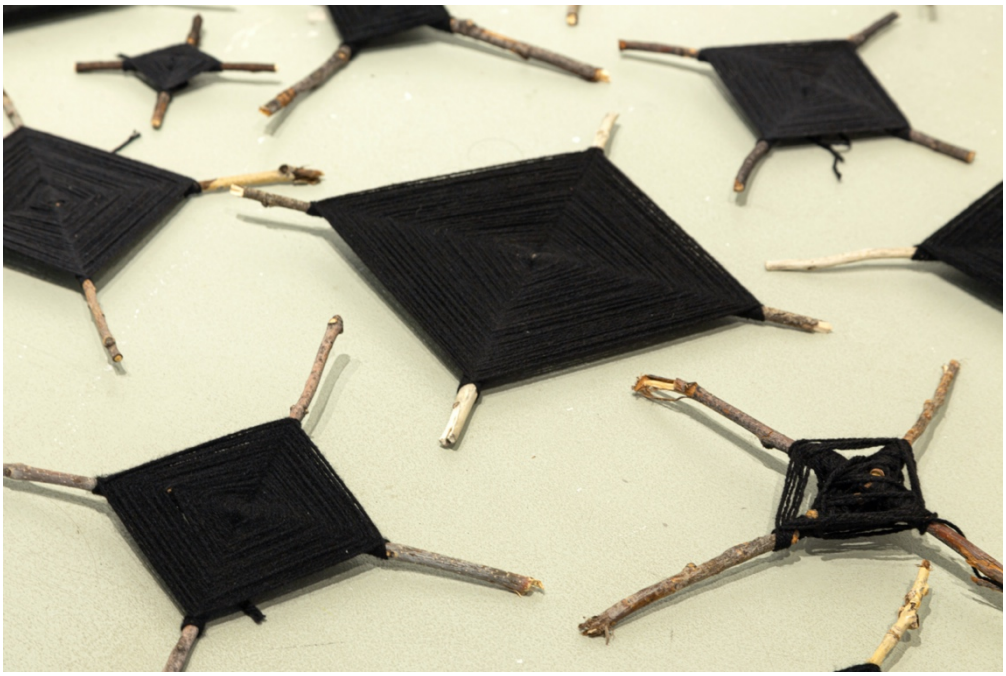


Figure 38. *Gathered*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 39. *Witnessed*, 2026.



Figure 40. *Witnessed*, 2026.

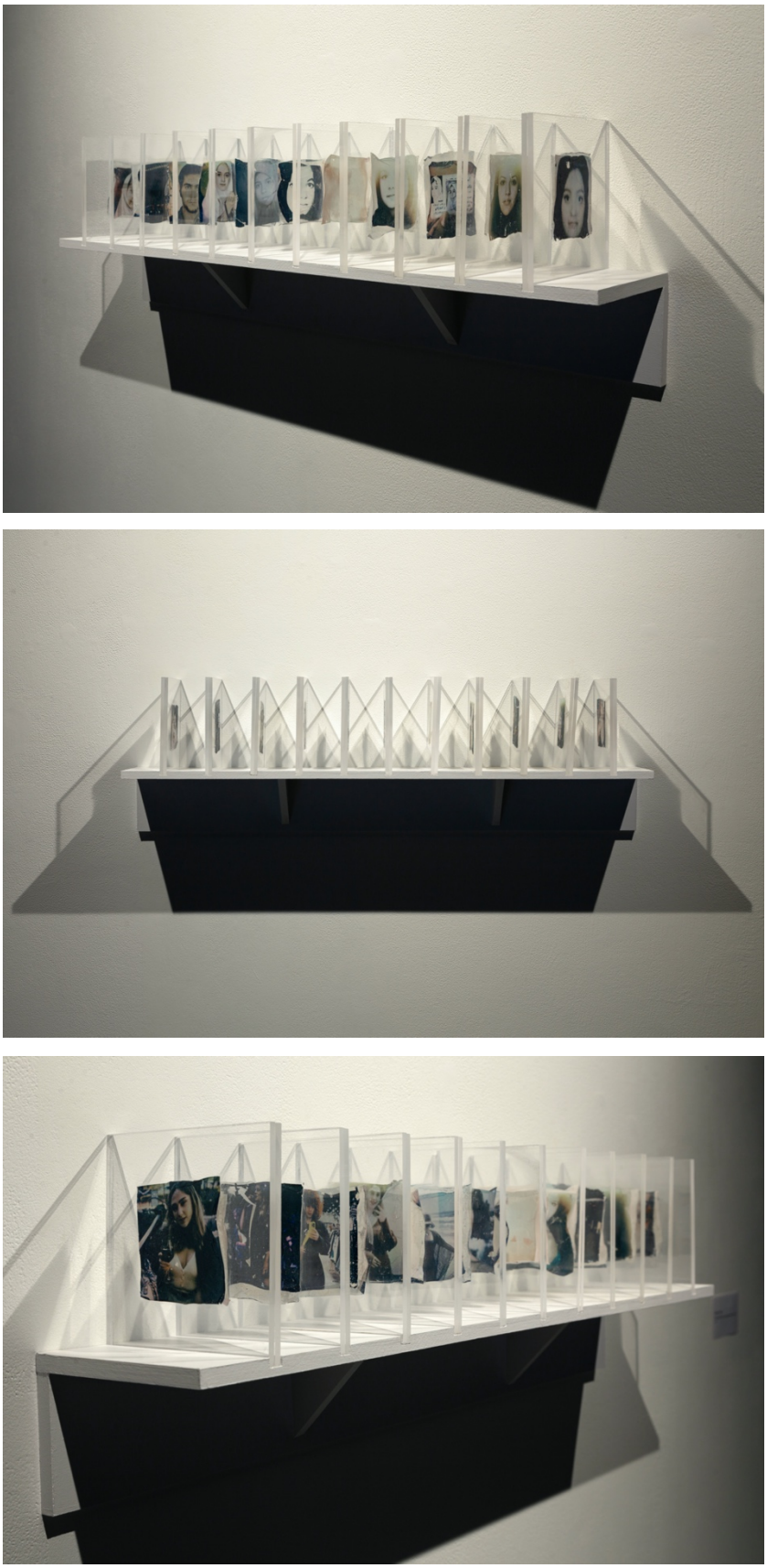


Figure 41. *Before/After*, 2026.



Figure 42. *Archive of the Body*, 2026.

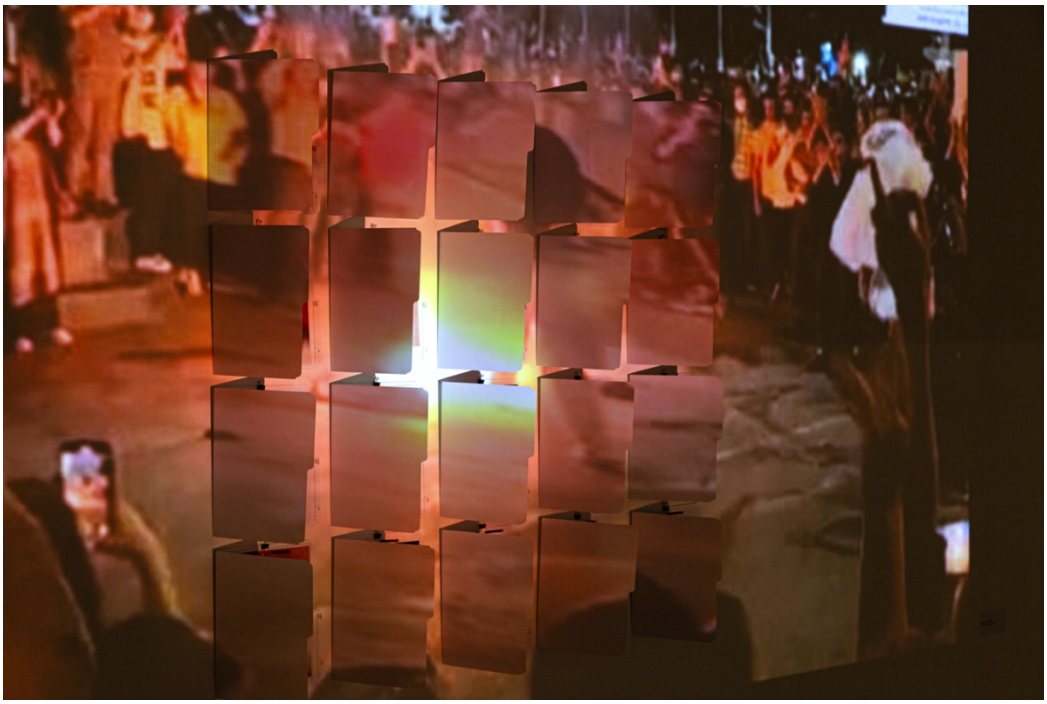


Figure 43. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 44. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 45. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 46. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 47. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.



Figure 48. *Archive of the Body*, (Detail), 2026.