**Criminalization**

We explore why criminalization is not the answer, and how we can build cross-movement alliances to work on stronger, more just alternatives.

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**Interview**

Azadeh Akhlaghi

The photographer speaks about her political and artistic vision, and her photo series being exhibited at #recon2019.

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**Campaign**

Together for Yes

Ireland’s historic referendum overturned a constitutional amendment that highly restricted access to abortion.

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**Space**

Questioning Dis/ability

This curated space provides a live and Immersive experience on disability and sexuality, and the experiences of women with disabilities.

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**Why are we here?**

S o much of our lives are under threat today. Restrictive political environments are posing serious threats to critical thinking, freedom of expression and human rights. States are silencing dissent in the name of national security.

In this moment of shifting power centers, feminists can no longer count on governance structures or human rights systems to protect or secure women’s rights. Movements are gearing up in different ways to meet these unprecedented challenges. Feminists, activists, artists, allies and policymakers in their own distinct and diverse styles and artistic expressions continue to challenge, provoke, and reimagine another world.

The following nine key themes are presented and highlighted at reconference in multiple mediums and formats.

**Abortion**

Let’s rethink cultural and popular narratives that guide the abortion discourse globally. Let’s reimagine decriminalization by mitigating the effects of restrictive legislation. Let’s reboot conversations on some of the most profound fault lines that have so far limited cross-movement alliance building on the issue of disability and abortion.

**Consent**

Let’s rethink critical questions about consent, recognizing the need to ensure that encounters are based on mutual and enthusiastic desire and not just permission. Let’s reimagine how consent plays out for different bodies, in different situations and in different people’s lives. Let’s reboot how ideas of consent can be used to expand an intersectional feminist agenda.

**Disability**

Let’s rethink issues of disability and sexuality. Let’s reimagine, through art and performance, women with disabilities as artists and build a powerful counter-narrative. Let’s reboot conversations on some of the most profound fault lines that have so far limited cross-movement alliance building on the issue of disability and abortion.

**Environmental Justice**

Let’s rethink issues of gender, sexuality, disability, health and human rights, drawing upon interactions with the environment. Let’s reimagine models of resistance and leadership inspired by the collective power of women in environmental activism. Let’s reboot our activism to address the inequalities faced by people on the margins because of environmental trends.

**Pleasure and Danger**

Let’s rethink pleasure, danger and who gets excluded when we talk about both. Let’s reimagine social norms and popular culture that push for contradictory definitions of pleasure and danger. Let’s reboot the idea of pleasure and danger as being a binary, and redefine them through the lenses of agency and autonomy.

**Sex Work**

Let’s rethink the binary between feminism and sex work. Let’s reimagine how we talk about sex work, and make the case for sex workers’ rights and decriminalization. Let’s reboot feminist organizations and movements to embrace sex workers’ rights and the full decriminalization of sex work as a feminist issue.

**Sexual/Gender Diversity**

Let’s rethink why we are choosing the language of ‘sexual’ and ‘gender-diversity’. Let’s reimagine ideas about sexual liberation, freedom and autonomy and place these back into the sexuality and gender discourse. Let’s reboot the possibilities of cross-movement alliance building and advocacy through narratives, stories and documentation.

**Sports**

Let’s rethink how to tackle discriminatory practices that act against women in sports on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, caste and ethnicity. Let’s reimagine new perspectives and solidarities within and across movements. Let’s reboot analysis around the policy and legal frameworks that restrict and control women in sports.

**Technology**

Let’s rethink the role and significance of technology in our lives. Let’s reimagine the digital as a powerful political space of opportunities and threats. Let’s reboot our activism away from the false binary of physical only versus digital only.

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**What to expect at #recon2019?**

500+ Participants from Across the Globe

180 Organizations

50+ Self-Led Movements

38 Artists


Reconference is being translated into seven languages – Hindi, English, Bengali, Arabic, Spanish, French and Sign.

In 2011, CREA organized its first conference Count Me In at Crowne Plaza Kathmandu, Soaltee. This was the only hotel in the city to adapt to the needs of people with disabilities. In 2018, when CREA began planning for #recon2019, this hotel was our first choice. This time, Crowne Plaza Kathmandu, Soaltee has made all outdoor spaces wheelchair accessible. The hotel has worked closely with us to build ramps and provide reasonable accommodation to people with disabilities. We have partnered with Planet Abled and have tried our best to make #recon2019 as accessible as possible!
Criminalization is not the answer

Excerpts from writings by CREA’s Executive Director Geetanjali Misra

In their article Criminal Law, Activism and Sexual Reproductive Justice: What We Can Learn from the Sex Selection Campaign, Geetanjali Misra and Vrinda Marwah begin by exploring the complexity of determining evidence of and causes for a skewed female-to-male sex ratio. The authors consider some of the messaging and advocacy intended to combat sex selection and ask whether these have inadvertently been counterproductive to a more transformative women’s rights agenda. Ultimately they want to examine the question of what a principled use of criminal law may look like on the questions of sex selection and abortion and, by extension, on the broader spectrum of sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

They write that, “Criminal law is a site where activists have sought to inscribe or challenge the limits of sexual relations – saying no to coercive sexual conduct and yes to same-sex sexual conduct, for instance. And although we are often acutely aware of the limits of the law as a force for social and systemic change, law also becomes a ready focus of a lot of our activism. When we engage with criminal law to further a human rights agenda, there are a range of issues, possibilities, and challenges that merit consideration.”

Geetanjali Misra goes on to highlight the impact of criminalization in her article Decriminalizing Homosexuality in India published in Reproductive Health Matters. “This law had led to a site where activists have sought to inscribe or challenge the limits of the law as a force for social and systemic change, law also becomes a ready focus of a lot of our activism. When we engage with criminal law to further a human rights agenda, there are a range of issues, possibilities, and challenges that merit consideration.”

Geetanjali Misra brings to a successful conclusion. A provision in the Penal Code of India that had endured since 1860, when it was imposed on all British colonies, was read down. The high publicity of the case has inspired debate and discussion among Indians who had not previously considered sexuality issues, opening minds and increasing the flow of new ideas. Across the country, the decision sparked celebrations among sexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups, which see decriminalization of homosexuality as a vital step on the road to their acceptance by the wider society.

Beyond Virtue and Vice

Rethinking Human Rights and Criminal Law

EDITED BY ALICE M. MILLER AND MINDY JANE ROSEMAN

An extract from the book’s introduction... and more

Decriminalization campaigns for abortion, sex work, and HIV regularly produce empirical studies of those who gets policed or goes to prison under these laws, with the factual evidence of the failure of intended effects and discrimination enlisted as part of the law reform efforts. Our calls to use criminal law for our own ends require a similar commitment to empiricism – solidarity and empathy, at least rhetorically, open a path toward accountability, the obligation to know and respond to the distributional and proportional consequences of criminalization for all... It is a tall order: the cultivation of solidarity, empathy, and accountability, informed by an awareness of indeterminacy and the knowledge that if we hold back on revenge, some may well suffer unfairly through failure to redress. This is why we premise our rules of engagement on a cautious, even ambivalent regard for both criminal justice and human rights.

A GLIMPSE OF THE BOOK

In Part I, Transnational Theory and Practice, Janet Halley is in conversation with Aziz Ahmed, Alice M. Miller and Tara Zervkovic discuss how prosecution became the go-to tool to vindicate rights. Alli Jernow discusses human rights, criminal law and the regulation of sex and gender and Wendy Brown reflects as a human rights activist.

In Part II, National Historical Perspectives, Sealing Cheng and Ae-Ryung Kim write about prostitution exceptionalism in South Korea, Sonia Corea and Maria Lucia Karam discuss Brazilian sex laws. Oliver Phillips discusses laws and customs in protecting and parcelling relations of gender and sexuality and Mindy Jane Roseman writes about abortion in France.

In Part III, Contexts of National Concerns, Alice Miller is in conversation with Wanja Mugungu, Geetanjali Misra and Vrinda Marwah write about their learnings from the sex selection campaign in India. Esteban Restrepo Saldarriaga discusses old moralities under new clothes. Rasha Moumneh discusses sex panic in Lebanon. Scott Long says objects in political mirrors may not be what they appear and Joanna N. Erdman makes an argument for decriminalization.
What has always interested me is the relationship between the viewer and the image – what I found in these animated light boxes – here there was something that was neither still nor moving but it was something in-between and it basically draws your attention in a very different way. It is like an interregnum – a space between.

We are inundated with moving images and we are inundated with still images and here something else happens.

AG: Can you please tell us something about your personal and artistic journey?

SC: I started as a documentary photographer and an activist in the women’s movement. It wasn’t that I was documenting the movement in any kind of journalistic sense. I was basically recoding it for us, for our own history. I was literally pointing the camera one moment and shouting slogans the next. So it was really photographed from within. Those images for me were meant to circulate within the movement and challenge stereotypes. In mainstream media, you either had the helpless victim, the beautiful maharani or the consumer. These images were of women in struggle, militant women trying to change social structures, confront patriarchy. A lot of that early period when I came back to Delhi and was involved with the women’s movement, the eighties, was very much about downing dovers. I built up, over about more than ten years a substantial record of the movement, not just protest but also workshops, discussions, street plays, etc.

By the end of the eighties, early nineties, I began to feel troubled by certain questions. It was increasingly clear that all photography was interpretive and that that is no medium is transparent. So each image was produced through the subjectivity of the photographer and therefore the politics of the photographer. However, this was contrary to the canon of documentary street photography and the objective ‘truth’ claim of photography.

In my own practice, I found that this militant image that I had in a way developed and which had been circulated and had in many ways become the face of the movement, had become the new stereotype. I would see press photographers, reporters taking that same shouting mouth and raised fist. That brought with it another kind of self-reflection. I felt that while I knew these women so well, they were my sisters in the movement, humansafar (fellow travelers) walking together. The images that I had created over this decade represented only one aspect of who they were.

I then went into an experiment to develop collaborative staged portraits with seven women from the women’s movement where I invited each woman to work with me to create a representation. This was very much about sharing the power of the photographer, changing the balance of power, giving the subject agency to determine how she is represented. I invited each woman [to] choose a place, to choose props, objects that would help tell her story. A portrait. A gaze. Together we would create a kind of mine-en-scène – like a theatrical set up – within which she would pose, speak; I would photograph.

What I was trying to do was to create a space of inter-subjectivity where the image we were producing was not mine and it was not even fully hers but it was something that we had co-created because of the empathetic space that we had created between ourselves. For me this was also trying to embody some feminist principles. I wanted to work these within the actual medium.

I was also troubled by the way in which photography is received... the gallery walk where you flip through the images you flip through the pages of a magazine. The first thing that I wanted to do was to take the photographs off the walls, take them into space and layer them, make the encounter complex and draw the viewer into the narrative. This led to creating large photo-based installations.

The work focused on women, on their conditions. This was some years before who lived on the banks of the Yamuna. I was looking at the riverbank is home to many marginal lives and over the years of wandering and traveling, it’s always been in any city, a very interesting place to go... and meet all kinds of people who do not fit into the mainstream, who end up on banks of rivers. At one time the banks were where civilizations started and now it’s the marginal and the rejects that you find there. They are often very interesting people so I made friends with this woman and she told me her story. I then showed her and I visited her over the years and the last time I saw her, she had been evicted from her home, and became a sadhu (ascetic). Then she faced a really ironical situation. As part of the drive to clean up the Yamuna what they really do is remove the poor. They destroyed a large community that was settled on the banks of the Yamuna for generations and turned the area into Yamuna Golden Jubilee Park. The people of the community that lived on the banks have been sent far away from their jobs, their lives. This was an under threat of displacement. This was something in the late nineties. She was struggling to show that she had a legal right to stay, been living there for 20 years. When I was creating this project that encounter came back to me. It is not necessary that I am working on a project and everything happens at that particular time because these are ongoing enquiries. The image of her holding her papers becomes emblematic of the precariousness and fragility of the lives of women in a hyper-developing city.
Coming together to reimagine feminist futures
The following excerpt from Imagery, Visibility and Disability, a blog by Lizzie Kiama, Founding Director, This-Ability provides an insightful analysis of the way disabled bodies are categorized. She argues that this should not just be critiqued but serves as a means to redo socially constructed ideas of beauty.

**SEX AND DISABILITY**

The Facts

**Fact 1** People with disabilities can be sexual and enjoy sex!

**Fact 2** People with disabilities don’t only have sex with one another.

**Fact 3** Sex is not just all about each other’s “privates.”

**Fact 4** People with a physical disability don’t just “lie there.”

**Fact 5** People with disabilities can and do use sex workers.

**Fact 6** People with disabilities can identify as LGBTIQ too.

**ALL BODIES ARE UNIQUE AND ESSENTIAL.**

**ALL BODIES ARE WHOLE. ALL BODIES HAVE STRENGTHS AND NEEDS THAT MUST BE MET.**

**WE ARE POWERFUL NOT DESPITE THE COMPLEXITIES OF OUR BODIES, BUT BECAUSE OF THEM.**

**WE MOVE TOGETHER, WITH NO BODY LEFT BEHIND.**

**THIS IS DISABILITY JUSTICE.**

**Photo of Leroy Moore by Richard Downin, text by Patty Berne and Sine Jiwali, layout by Mirah Bazant**

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**DaDaFest: Encountering sexuality through disability and deaf arts**

The following is an extract from an article titled Artivism and the Last Avant Garde: A Route to Sexuality, Embodiment and Disability Justice published in the journal Arrow for Change by Janet Price, a disabled feminist and academic.

**S** tarted in Liverpool over 30 years ago, DaDaFest (the Disability and Deaf Arts Festival) acts as a channel for developing and sharing the ideas of disabled artists, art that serves as a force to claim justice and rights for disabled people. DaDaFest advocates for disabled artists to develop professional and artistic skills, and cuts through the discrimination they face within both the art world and amongst the broader public.

Producing a wide range of visual and performance arts and working through local and global connections, one of DaDaFest’s aims is to challenge assumptions about disability… the work DaDaFest produces is often edgy, challenging heteronormative disability stereotypes, questioning fixed ideas of the ‘body beautiful’, and undermining stigma and prejudice about beliefs of disabled people’s non- sexual lives.

The dance work of Claire Cunningham [one of the UK’s most acclaimed disabled artists who is associated with DaDaFest] takes us back to dreams, the things we yearn for, to the potential moments of intimacy in our lives. Claire’s dance partners are the crutches she uses to move around in the world, her supports, always by her side, indispensable, solid – but not renowned for speaking. Yet with Claire, they become garrulous, voluble, sharing Claire’s desires as an extension of her body. In the short Ménage à Trois, when Claire says “We click!” we see the connections weaving through her crutches to the invisible figure of Claire’s, perhaps of our own, desire… as individuals reach out and use art to make relationships across differences, build connections that allow them to understand more of the injustice others face within disability, sexuality, and its related intersections, and in turn respond to these through creating and sharing art, they discover ways to build alliances of people campaigning for disability rights and justice. And together these groups connect to create a more just and equitable world.
The landmarks in the evolution to the abortion laws in India can be traced back to 1973 where a 15-year-old victim of rape was prevented from travelling to England to terminate her pregnancy. The Supreme Court overturned the initial decision, holding that the credible threat of suicide was grounds for abortion in Ireland. After the Supreme Court judgment, two amendments were passed that effectively allowed Irish citizens to travel to another country for a legal abortion. In 2012, a woman called Savita Halappanavar died in a hospital in Galway because she was refused an abortion during a miscarriage, due to the presence of a fetal heartbeat. Halappanavar's death led to widespread protests, and in 2013, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act was passed, which legalized abortion for women whose lives were at risk due to a miscarriage or due to the presence of a fetal heartbeat. Halappanavar's tragedy led to the introduction of new laws in Ireland, which allowed abortions to be carried out in both houses of parliament. It was the collaborative effort of the queer community and its allies and the decade-long consistent struggle with a dose of the changing legal narrative of the country that led to the 6th September 2018 judgment.

As the court said, “We must, as a society, ask searching questions to the forms and symbols of injustice. Unless we do that, we risk becoming the cause and not just the inheritors of an unjust society. Does the constitution allow a quaer of fear to become the quilt around the bodies of her citizens, in the inti- macies which define their identi- ties? If there is only one answer to this question, as I believe there is, the tragedy and anguish which Section 377 inflicts must be remedied.”

Together for Yes and a Historic Referendum

In 2018, The People’s Republic of Ireland held a historic referendum, whereby through a majority vote the 35-year-old 8th constitutional amendment which equated the life of a preg-nant woman to the fetus, making abortion highly restricted, was overturned.

6th September 2018 will go down in history as the day the Supreme Court of India upheld equality, non-discrimi- nation and dignity of persons, and decriminalized the archaic Section 377 of the Penal Code. Section 377, which was introduced into Indian criminal laws in 1860, criminalized adult same sex consensual sexual relationships.

“History,” the Court observed, “owes an apology to the members of this community and their fami- lies, for the delay in providing redressal for the ignorance and ostracism that they have suffered through the centuries. The mem- bers of this community were comp-elled to live a life full of fear of reprisal and persecution. This was on account of the ignorance of the majority to recognize that homo- sexuality is a completely natural condition, part of a range of human sexuality. The mis-application of this provision denied them the funda- mental right to equality guaran- teed by Article 14. It infringed the fundamental right to non discrimi- nation under Article 15, and the fundamental right to live a life of dignity and privacy guaranteed by Article 21. LGBT persons deserve to live a life unshackled from the shadow of being “unapprehended felons.”

The journey to decriminalization began in 2001 and was anything but easy. The cornerstone of the petition was the cross-movement collabora- tion and consultation with multi- ple rights groups including child rights, LGBT rights and women’s rights. Importantly, the petition did not pray for striking down section 377 but to read it down to exclude adult consensual sex in private. The prayer was extremely strategic and thought through, ensuring that all rights-based organizations were on board. It was, however, more than a legal battle.

While decriminalization was always part of the struggle, social acceptance has always been a bigger and more deep-rooted chal- lenge. The story of India’s journey to decriminalization is definitely not complete without acknowledg- ing both sides of the coin. To strengthen the petition, which was filed by Naz Foundation India Trust in the Delhi High Court and to highlight violations, a coalition of LGBT rights, child rights and wom- en’s rights activists came together and intervened in the petition, adding their voices to Naz.

The coalition, called Voices Against 377, was a group of 12 organi- zations (CREA, Taishi, Sama, Pratham, Asha, Leela, Jagate, Nirantar, Nigah, Partners for Law in Development & Sahi) and five individuals (Prasmina Meon, Sumit Baudh, Poonia Arasa, Lesley Estes & Gwant Ilvan).

Voices against 377 launched large-scale education campaigns raising awareness on the issue among the general public, the media, the health professions and students. Activities included dem- onstrations, press conferences and a ‘Million Voices’ campaign, which gathered tens of thousands of signa- tures against Section 377.

In 2009, the Delhi High Court, in what was a groundbreaking judgment, decriminalized homo- sexuality observing that “...Indian constitutional law does not permit the statutory criminal law to be held captive by the popular misconcep- tions of who the LGBTs are. It cannot be forgotten that discrimination is (the) antithesis of equality and that it is the recognition of equality which will foster the dignity of every individual.”

However, fundamental rights weren’t upheld for long and in 2013 the Supreme Court, in an appeal filed by certain conservative groups, rectified homosexuality. The court justified this on the ground that “(W)hile reading down Section 377 IPC, the Division Bench of the High Court overlooked that a mini- mal population does not constitute lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgender...”

Despite the decision, the fight did not stop. People were shocked and let down by the decision. But people within the community sup- ported each other and decided to fight harder. Activism did not stop. Groups and organizations contin- ued to work with various stake- holders. Courts might not have recognized the fundamental human rights of LGBTs people, but activists were determined to work from the ground up and push back.

During this time, sexual assault laws in India changed. Specific laws protecting children from sexual abuse were introduced. Rape laws were amended to include non peno- vaginal rape. The two grounds – that Section 377 protects children from sexual abuse and that it pro- tects women from non peno-vagi- nal rape – which were being used by conservative groups to push for retaining Section 377 in its original language, were now specifically covered by criminal law.

In addition, in 2017 the Supreme Court in a 9 judge bench decision, while upholding the right to privacy as a fundamental right observed that the rights of the LGBT com- munity are “not ‘so-called’ but are real rights founded on sound con- stitutional doctrine. They inher- e in the right to life. They dwell in pri- vacy and dignity. They constitute the essence of liberty and freedom. Sexual orientation is an essential component of identity. Equal pro- tection demands protection of the identity of every individual without discrimination.”

It was the collaborative effort of the queer community and its allies and the decade-long consistent struggle with a dose of the chang- ing legal narrative of the country that led to the 6th September 2018 judgment.

As the court said, “(W)e must, as a society, ask searching questions to the forms and symbols of injustice. Unless we do that, we risk becom- ing the cause and not just the inheri- tors of an unjust society. Does the constitution allow a quaer of fear to become the quilt around the bodies of her citizens, in the inti- macies which define their identi- ties? If there is only one answer to this question, as I believe there is, the tragedy and anguish which Section 377 inflicts must be remedied.”
Making Ask the Sexpert

Vaishalli Sinha’s Ask the Sexpert tells the story of Dr Mahinder Watsa, a legendary 90-year-old sex advice columnist from Bombay, India. The film has garnered great reviews and standing ovations after its India premiere, and has received multiple awards, including the Critics’ Choice Award in India in 2018. Vaishali will screen the film at #recon2019.

CREA’s Sanjana Gaind spoke to her about the film.

SG: A memory from filming with him that makes you smile?
VS: Here is an example of one of his notoriously famous answers from the column.
Question: “I have a goat. Her name is Ramila. I have been thinking about how it would feel to make love to her. Is this normal?”
Answer: “Ask Ramila.”

SG: Why did you think it was important to make a film about this?
VS: Sexuality education! I felt there is often a polarization of the topic in news debates – sexuality education is either called imperative or corrupting. I wanted to use the format of vérité filmmaking to really understand how conversations about sex and sexuality with an educator or a therapist could truly play out.

The Political Cabaret of 4 Queens

La Banda De Las Recodas is a cabaret show under the concert format of Mexican popular music in which the Hermanas Carrilla make social and political criticism with each song. This is one of its most popular shows and has been screened at various festivals in places such as New York, Chicago, Brazil, Argentina and Denmark.

SG: How does it feel to be in Kathmandu with only three queens (Cabaréxegeta, Reina Chula and Escritora)?
4Q: Well, we are really sad about that because we are always happier together, but Nora is making a great project in Mexico and we are really excited to be here.

SG: Why the name 4 Queens?
4Q: It’s a saying in Mexico (a popular one) to call someone you kind of like. Something like sweetheart.

SG: How long have you all been together?
4Q: 21 years!
By an Eye-Witness 2013-12

GF: After majoring in computer science, what made you decide to become a photographer?
AA: It was really a long-term process. I was always fascinated by the world of art. When I was sixteen, I wanted to be a poet and, only a few years after that, I started to do journalism work. But even when I moved to Australia to pursue my Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science, I knew that it wasn’t what I wanted to do for a living. So I started to take some elective courses in photography. Well, initially I wanted to pursue a career in movie production, but I knew it needed money and resources that I didn’t have. So I focused my time on photography. And then I came up with this project and I have to tell you, the process of completing this project was very similar to producing a movie.

GF: What was the main purpose of this project and how did you come up with the idea for it?
AA: I was always curious about Iran’s complex history and I knew that there was just this truth that was hidden somewhere and we couldn’t find it. The truth behind all of these deaths and the reason that made these characters – my characters – risk their lives so that the next generation could live better and happier. It was just something that I could not understand. And what was more interesting was that some events have happened in Iran over and over again. It is as if some historical events are repetitive, and this repetition was the main reason for this project.

I wanted to focus on the fact that all of these frames are from my own perspective – the artist’s view. The truth could not be exactly what is shown in these images and I could never reach the whole truth. I wanted to emphasize my own presence as a representative of the next generation in the images. With this project, I wanted to remind our people that a dark energy and potential has always existed during our history and that this history needs to be remembered.

GF: How did you decide on the characters and the moments that you wanted to capture?
AA: I spent a long time reading about each of them. I sort of lived with these characters for a long time in my head. The main point was to capture moments in history that there were no photos of. I was trying to portray and stage some very important historical events that no one has witnessed. Initially, the images I took were more than seventeen, but during the progress of the project, some of them were cut out. For example, Dr Fatemi, Iran’s Foreign Affairs Minister from 1951 to 1953, was one of those characters. He was executed, but since there were some images available from the aftermath of his death, his image was cut from the project.

GF: Could you tell us more about the photograph of Dr Mossadegh?
AA: This image somehow marks the identity of this project. AA: I can’t really say that, but Dr Mossadegh is a prominent figure and personally I feel a deep connection to him. Because of that, his death and its aftermath were very important to me. And what was very disappointing was that historical sources about the day that he died are very limited. One of the things that I really struggled with was that we couldn’t find out how the weather was the day he died. Was it sunny, rainy or cold? And this was just one of the smallest shortcomings. The focus in Dr Mossadegh’s image is the absence of Iranian people during that day – a historical absence – and, in my opinion, the pain which resulted because of that absence is still carried by the people.

GF: Why didn’t you revisit the after-math of the 1979 revolution again and especially the Iraq-Iran war?
AA: The main reason was that I only wanted to go as far as the onset of the Islamic Revolution. I didn’t want to work on recent history. But after further consideration, I thought that some characters, like Shahid Baki and Aysollah Taleghani and their deaths were also among the tragic deaths in Iranian history.

GF: The project has been deemed ‘political’ and ‘controversial’. What was your audience’s reaction to the project?
AA: I can’t really argue. Of course, it got a lot of attention even before the show, but I think most of the reactions were positive. To tell you the truth, I saw a lot of unexpected reactions during the exhibition. The gallery was full of people the whole time, to the point that some of them weren’t able to see the images closely. People would hug me and some of them actually started crying during the show. An old lady came to the gallery and said that her son had called her from Berlin and had asked her to come and see the exhibition.

In my opinion, it was as if people had never got the chance to mourn these deaths and now, this project and the images in front of them had given them the time and the instrument to release their agony and pain.

GF: What challenges did you face when you were working on the project?
AA: The most challenging aspect was the shortcomings in [available] history and the limited resources we had for some of these characters. There were no writings or photos of these deaths and for some of them, I had to rely on the memory of my interviewees – individuals who were present at the time of these deaths or had close relationships with these people.

Also, sometimes, in a moment of shock, when something has happened, the brain loses its [capacity to] function. For example, when I witness a tragic moment, something horrible, I can’t hear anything. My eyes somehow lose sight and I have to check with other people to see whether they have witnessed the same thing. During this project, when I spoke to people, I understood that many of them had seen something that hadn’t actually happened.

GF: What are some of your other projects? Could you tell us more about them?
AA: Me, as the Other Prefers is another big project that I did in 2011. Reflection of Self and Suspension in Tehran are my other projects. Suspension in Tehran was a series based on the obscurity of cities, especially Tehran, and how youngsters are somehow suspended within this concept.

Me, as the Other Prefers was a twenty-part self-portrait through the eyes of ‘others’, depicting how people try to be the person that others want them to be. This ‘being’ can be seen in the way they dress or talk, or even what is expected of them. I wanted to show how this gigantic ‘other’ determines how we live.