# 05. VIBRANT ARCHIVES. ARCHIVING AFGHAN EXILE ART AND ACTIVISM ON INSTAGRAM

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## Introduction

A video on Instagram shows a woman on a small ladder meticulously pasting a green poster onto a Parisian street sign.[[1]](#footnote-1) The poster resembles the sign in layout, color, and graphics, but it carries another name: *Allée du Commandant Massoud* is, according to the poster, re-named *Allée de Frozan Saafi*. The substitution of the name of the Afghan military commander, also known as the Lion of Panjshir, on four street signs in central Paris for the names of four female Afghan activists was a performance carried out by artist Kubra Khademi on the 30th of January 2022. It is documented, distributed, and archived on her social media profiles on Twitter and Instagram. This is not the first time Khademi, working with feminist and politically engaged art, employs digital media as a central element in her work. In 2015 she walked the streets of Kabul wearing armor with enhanced female forms, a public performance that led to death threats and her subsequent migration to France.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was documented with a video camera and uploaded to YouTube where it can still be found under its title *Armor.*[[3]](#footnote-3)

Khademi is, sadly, not the only artist or activist who has been forced to leave Afghanistan in the past years. The fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and the ensuing takeover by the Taliban set in motion another period of mass-migration from the country and its capital in the late summer of 2021. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 2.6 million Afghans are currently living as refugees while 3.5 million are internally displaced and The Artistic Freedom Initiative, an organization devoted to assisting artists at risk of persecution in their homelands to resettle elsewhere, reported that they alone received almost 3,000 individual requests from Afghan artists after the Taliban takeover.[[4]](#footnote-4) Artists and activists are an especially persecuted group under the Taliban regime that has, amongst other things, beaten protesters, moved against the playing of music in public spaces, and painted over murals in Kabul and other cities.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Omaid Sharifi, founder of ArtLords, an Afghan artivist grassroots movement, says, ‘It is not possible for the Taliban to live with art’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This chapter investigates how three female exiled Afghan artists, Kubra Khademi (b. 1989), Shamsia Hassani (b. 1988), and Rada Akbar (b. 1988), all working with feminist issues and anti-war agendas, employ social media as new distributional and archival spaces. In the chapter, I thus ask: How do female Afghan artists use social media platforms, specifically Instagram, to document, distribute, and archive artistic and activist practices and performances?

I argue that in the turmoil of conflict and relocation Instagram functions not only as a means of communicating with friends, family and followers but also as an alternative deterritorialized exhibition space and archive where site-specific and/or lost works and performances can be shared and preserved in spite of their material destruction and their institutional and cultural marginalization.

In the chapter, it is suggested that the social media platform is used by the artists to fulfill three fundamental functions: 1) It documents and distributes the work and protests of precarious activists, artists, and groups, 2) it is used as an integral element in their aesthetic practices, works, and performances, and 3) it provides the digital infrastructure for the recording of lived experience and expressions of affects in so-called archives of feeling.[[7]](#footnote-7) Through the sampling of digital texts and analyses of aesthetic works, communicative content and archival practices, the chapter thus aims to show how artists employ social media not only to *curate* and *circulate* expressions of Afghan feminist art and activism, but also to *claim* and *reframe* the cultural production of Afghan women’s voices and subject positions.[[8]](#footnote-8)

## Context and theoretical framework

Afghanistan has been the scene of various wars and conflicts for the larger part of the past four decades. In 2001, the US led alliance invaded the country as a response to the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban’s refusal to surrender the leaders of Al-Qaeda. The invasion turned into a lengthy military operation in the country and The Costs of War project, monitoring the human and economic costs of the post-9/11 wars, reports more than 176,000 deaths caused directly by war in Afghanistan alone.[[9]](#footnote-9) The 20-year presence of American and allied forces came to an end in August 2021 where the withdrawal of the remaining international soldiers caused the panic scenes in the airport of Kabul which were circulated globally by news media and on social media platforms. Many Kabulis were desperate to escape the Taliban which took over the capital and the country. Amongst those fleeing the new regime were members of the Afghan art scene. They, thus, joined the group of exiled artists who had already been forced to leave the country during the decades of conflict and unrest.

Despite the grave sociopolitical context, Afghanistan has continued to produce a wide range of popular cultural, traditional, and contemporary artists and Kabul has – before August 2021 – been described as having a small but ‘rich culture of artistic production’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Certainly, a new generation of artists working with street art, visual art, photography, and performance art has seen the light of day and female artists such as Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, Fatimah Hossaini, Malina Suliman, and Rada Akbar are now gaining international recognition. Not much research has been done on these Afghan artists and their aesthetic practices though. Curator and arts consultant Jemima Montagu notes how the international aid organizations have intervened, financially and creatively, in the Afghan art scene and caused the widespread instrumentalization of art.[[11]](#footnote-11) Sociologist Bilquis Ghani has investigated the pedagogy of public art – the street art of the aforementioned Sharifi and Hassani, for example – and the use of art as a space to produce counter-narratives in opposition to the widespread islamophobia and stereotyping of Afghans in the Western cultural imagination.[[12]](#footnote-12) This chapter adds to this field knowledge of how Afghan artists in exile employ social media platforms to reach a global audience and to create and preserve artistic and activist practices.

Western stereotypes and expectations are certainly relevant to address when working with female Afghan artists challenging social roles, specifically those related to gender, in their work and using social media to, as Ghani puts it, ‘offer counter-narratives to global mainstream media’ and their depictions of Afghans.[[13]](#footnote-13) The so-called West has for a long time cultivated a certain orientalized image of Afghan women as silent and subordinated beings to be saved.[[14]](#footnote-14) The burqa wearing woman has served as a legitimizing symbol of the continued military presence in the country. International soldiers were in Afghanistan, the story in Western media goes, to secure Afghan women’s human rights and Afghan girls’ education. This intense preoccupation with Afghan women and girls, however, has not created a sustained interest in, or ability to listen to, the actual experiences and opinions of these women in Western media publics. As Vera Mackie concludes in her analysis of globally distributed photographic representations of Afghan girls, ‘these representations position the first-world viewer as active and articulate spectator and the third-world woman (sic) as passive and silent sufferer’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The three contemporary female artists, through their continued practice, all challenge this problematic dichotomy as well as local Afghan expectations of what women can and ought to do.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Accordingly, following Chantal Mouffe’s definition of critical art as ‘art that foments dissensus’ and aims ‘at giving voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony’, the selected artists can all be said to work within a critical aesthetic realm. According to Mouffe, critical art plays a decisive role in challenging consensual views on society and in opening up possibilities for ‘the construction of new subjectivities’.[[17]](#footnote-17) As such, art becomes a transformative vehicle for societal change in its ability to challenge existing hegemonies and produce new perspectives on the social, political, cultural, and economic order. Activist and art scholar Stephen Duncombe, moreover, stresses that art is also an important element in activist endeavors to change existing material realities because it can *affect* its audience. The production of activist effects goes through the aesthetic production of affective stimuli and, thus, ‘when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other’s business’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Even if one can never be certain as to the outcome of the affective stimuli given by a work of art, the activist artist can work towards one or more transformational goals: change the way people think, feel, and talk about a certain issue (cultural shifts/change) and/or effectuate concrete material or structural change in the world (material impact/result).[[19]](#footnote-19)

Khademi, Akbar, and Hassani produce work critiquing the structures pertaining to gender-based and geopolitical violence and marginalization. Hence with Duncombe’s transformational goals in mind, we can observe how they work towards long-term cultural and material changes as they challenge sedimented social and political power structures and perceptions of the world. Finally, Duncombe defines the activist artist to be any ‘artist who hopes to bring about social, economic or political change through art’.[[20]](#footnote-20) This inclusive definition of activism and activist art allows us to consider how the three exiled artists are all engaged in feminist quests for the transformation of societies and international relations through art. It is, however, interesting to note that Khademi and Akbar offer seemingly opposing reflections upon their roles as activists and artists in two research-interviews I conducted with them in the fall of 2022. Khademi stresses how she has always considered herself an artist. While acknowledging the importance of activism, she resists the title of activist since art is her primary medium of expression, adding ‘but I do say, I am a feminist’. On the other hand, Akbar considers herself to be first and foremost an activist since she has ‘chosen art as a tool to do activism’, but also stresses the feminist goals of her work. Akbar furthermore explains how, for her, social media are primarily tools for her activism. I will continue to use the term activist artist – rather than, e.g., activist, artivist, or political artist – throughout the chapter to capture the flexibility and the productive tension inherent in the compound term.

The merging of artistic measures and political ends is, of course, not new. However, what has changed remarkably within the last decades is the availability of digital technologies and platforms that can be used to produce, distribute, and archive these artistic and activist practices. Leah Lievrouw suggests four basic features are characteristic of new media: they are interactive and (seemingly) ubiquitous; they evolve through the recombination of existing media forms; and they promote a networked organization of society and technology.[[21]](#footnote-21) Through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, users can share, produce, promote, alter, and connect to relevant, and irrelevant, media content at almost all times and places. This, MacDowall and Budge argue in their work on Instagram and art, has significant implications for all art professionals and artists: Instagram ‘embodies a new cultural logic of the networked art image’.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, I would add, it has particular value and meaning for exiled artists who in the turmoil of conflict and relocation can reach a diverse, geographically scattered audience with works, opinions, and updates without the interference of and dependency on cultural institutions, museums, and mainstream media. The circumvention of traditional art institutions also opens for the possibility that artists online can influence audiences who ‘highly unlikely […] will ever travel to such a place’ with their artistic work.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Since a basic affordance of the mentioned social media platforms is the continued accumulation of content on personal profile pages, ordered in reverse chronological order like the original blog format, it has been suggested that we can understand social media as personal archives and as taking part in forming an ‘archival culture’.[[24]](#footnote-24) The relation between social media and the concept of the archive is, however, one of dispute and ambivalence. Social media are, for one thing, controlled more by tech companies’ economic interests and algorithmic modulations and by users’ personal and volatile ideas of what to post, how to post it, and for how long to keep it, than by institutional endeavors to serve public interests to preserve media texts for the future (as in the case of the Internet Archive).[[25]](#footnote-25) As such, conceptualizing social media as forms of archival spaces might require, as David Beer contends, that we are aware that these new ‘commercial’ archival spaces have ‘a very different logic to the archives of the past’ and that we do not over-stress the transparent, emancipatory, and democratic potential of this form of idiosyncratic social media archiving.[[26]](#footnote-26) One way to work with the artists’ social media profiles as ambivalent cultural memory spaces is to adhere to the distinction between ‘recordmaking’ and ‘recordkeeping’ suggested by Rebecka Taves Sheffield. She contends that while recordmaking (‘the use of any kind of media to communicate to others information about an individual or collective experience or action’) is an inherent part of recordkeeping, recordkeeping also entails the practice of ensuring ‘that records are authentic and reliable, have integrity, and are usable in the present and a potential future state’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, even if social media are recordmaking-technologies, they are, according to Sheffield, harder to conceptualize as recordkeeping-spaces since there are no agents and infrastructure to ensure media texts’ preservation in a fixed and retrievable form for future use. Sheffield’s distinction is useful when working with the records of activist and artist practices online. However, the distinction relies on a formalized practice of keeping records that is often not possible to conduct and/or maintain in loosely defined, informal, emergent, and less mature or less formally organized social movements.[[28]](#footnote-28)

As such, I recognize that, at least from an archivist point of view, social media are not platforms fit to fulfil the recordkeeping functions of the traditional, or *proper*, archive but also suggest that often these unordered and unorderly records are all that we are left with in the cultural memory work regarding activist artists’ practices online. Furthermore, as the analysis will show, the three artists do often show an acute awareness of not only making but also of *keeping* records such as artworks, activist communication, and prosaic media texts which is why I, despite all theoretical and practical reservations, will continue to use the terms ‘archive’ and ’archiving’. We might view the artists’ profiles as informal, vibrant, and with Levey, ‘*de facto*’ archives of artistic-activist oeuvres which would otherwise risk both destruction (due, for example, to the momentary and extra-institutional character or the site-specific and vulnerable materiality of the artworks) and cultural oblivion (due to the peripheral position of the exiled activist artist and the ensuing ‘institutional neglect’).[[29]](#footnote-29) These archival spaces are inherently unstable and vibrating with the unfolding of the global, local, and personal crises of migration and war. To the extent that they question the in- and exclusions of institutional archival processes and the hegemonic production of knowledge, they can be likened to counter-archives found in unexpected places and forming ‘a collection of absences: the documents that are not collected or do not exist’ elsewhere.[[30]](#footnote-30) Such peripheral, sometimes dissident, digital archives are, according to Arjun Appadurai, often of great significance to migrants and exiled groups since they not only present ‘a guide to the uncertainties of identity-building under adverse conditions’, but also allow for the construction of a counter-narrative to the dominant ‘narratives of public memory in the new home of the migrant, where the migrant is frequently seen as a person with only one story to tell – the story of abject loss and need’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

To flesh out these differential functions of the informal, vibrant social media archiving, I turn to Merrill et al. who, in their work on social movements’ use of digital media, suggest that there are three fundamental clusters of media practices to be found in online memory work: curation (i.e. documentation, selection, display), circulation, and claiming.[[32]](#footnote-32) We may consider the profiles of the three activist artists as alternative exhibition spaces functioning both to *collect* and *curate* artistic work, processes, and performances and to *circulate* professional communication, political messages, personal perspectives, and intimate emotions. Finally, I argue, the artists also re-*claim* and reframe the discursive stereotyping of Afghanistan and ‘the Afghan woman’ through their construction of an activist-aesthetic archive of images, performances, feelings, and protests.

## Method

Even if most of these practices are carried out across platforms, I will focus on the Instagram profiles of Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, and Rada Akbar. Instagram has been chosen because it is the platform where all three artists have most followers (compared to Facebook and Twitter) and because it prioritizes visual content, which makes it an interesting place to investigate the distribution and recording of activist art.[[33]](#footnote-33) All three artists have public, open-access profiles and all seem to consider the media content shared on the platform public rather than private; witness their bio texts, which all emphasize professional identities and contact information. Informed consent to use the media texts for research has, nevertheless, been obtained directly from Akbar and Khademi and Hassani’s manager. While Akbar and Hassani each have one profile under their own name, Khademi has two – one solely dedicated to art and one with a more mixed content. The following table provides an overview of the profiles:[[34]](#footnote-34)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Username | Active since | Number of followers | Number of posts | Bio text |
| radaakbar | 10.2012 | 9,970 | 396 | Conceptual artist. Photographer. Founder @abarzanan. www.abarzanan.com |
| shamsiahassani | 01.2015 | 256,000 | 508 | Official Instagram profile of Shamsia Hassani (شمسیه حسنی) the Afghan graffiti/street artist. For inquiries, contact: shah@shamsiahassani.net www.shamsiahassani.net/ |
| kubra\_khademi | 04.2019 | 8,130 | 254 | Multidisciplinary artist from Afghanistan / based in Paris, France / Contact @galerieericmouchet |
| khademikubra | 11.2015 | 7,204 | 968 | Multidisciplinary Artist / From Afghanistan / Based in Paris, France / 2nd Instagram : @kubra\_khademi |

When considering that some of the most followed Instagram accounts have 300-500 million followers, the artists’ number of followers – except maybe for Hassani’s 256,000 – might not seem spectacular. However, for an upcoming artist, reaching a potential audience of 7,000-9,000 people with each artwork posted can represent not only a significant increase with respect to the number of people expected to attend traditional smaller scale art exhibitions but also in terms of audience diversity. Characteristic of all three artists’ profiles is the fact that they appeal to an international audience (comments include ones in English, Dari, French, and Spanish), which means that the artists can use Instagram to reach a global cohort of people interested in, for example, art, Afghanistan, feminism and/or activism. Furthermore, all three artists use English in most posts to address this globally scattered audience. Writing as a European citizen, I am part of the heterogenous social media audience that the media texts address. In the following analysis, I will focus on the content shared by the artists themselves. This qualitative approach has been chosen to analyze ‘the specific ways in which artists use or understand the Instagram platform’ as a distributional and archival space.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In terms of sampling, I will work with posts publicized between August 2021 and October 2022. This period has been chosen with reference to the Taliban takeover in August 2021. On this occasion, Hassani and Akbar were forced to leave the country that Khademi had already fled. The reinstatement of the Taliban regime presents both a personal moment of upheaval for the artists and an international crisis. In the aftermath, the artists have in different ways utilized their profiles and artworks to speak up against Taliban and geopolitical power relations as well as to raise awareness of the continued humanitarian and political crises in Afghanistan. The artists posted, in total, 300 times on Instagram in the period studied: Hassani 79, Khademi 176 on her primary and 29 on her secondary profile, and Akbar 16; I will also address Khademi and Akbar’s use of the story function. The posts present a variety of content with a majority focusing on recording artistic processes, presenting finished artworks, and promoting upcoming exhibitions. I will use my analysis, however, to show the different types of recordmaking and -keeping carried out on the four social media accounts: the documentation of site-specific and/or destroyed art works, the creation and circulation of critical performances, and the use of digital texts as repositories of feeling. I will focus on one function in each of the three artists’ online practices, this structuring device, however, does not mean that all three do not use the platform for *curation and documentation*, *creation and circulation*, and *re-claiming*.

## Analysis

*Documenting disappearing lines of flight*

On September 16, 2021, street artist and former art lecturer at Kabul University Shamsia Hassani posted two pictures and a text on her Instagram profile (fig. 5.1.). The first picture is split in two and shows a ‘before’: a mural of a woman with a burqa-like head-attire but a bared neck and a red, glittering heart on top of her black dress, and an ’after’: a whitewashed wall. The second picture shows the artist next to her work at some point before its erasure. Hassani’s text – in both English and Dari – informs the audience of what they are witnessing:[[36]](#footnote-36)

I just received this image after the arrival of T aliban [sic]. They painted over one of my graffitis in Kabul. Probably they painted over my other murals in the city as well (I still don’t have any pictures of them). […] I never imagined that our world will suddenly fall and we will never get to the day that I was waiting for.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The post documents Hassani’s site-specific street art piece and circulates it among a large digital audience – it has more than 56,000 likes and 2,600 comments. It also documents the gradual disappearance and erasure of existing urban art *in situ* in Kabul and, thus, pinpoints the immediate necessity for the artists to develop self-reflexive strategies for preserving their own work online.

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Fig. 5.1. ‘Mural. Before/After’ (@shamsiahassani, 16.09.2021), with the permission of Shamsia Hassani.

The Taliban’s infamous practice of painting over murals has been covered widely by global news media. To a regime reacting violently to forms of dissidence, Hassani’s mural might present a specifically problematic envisioning of feminist liberation. In the artwork, located in a Kabul residential area, the woman’s burqa-like veil is cut or unraveled at the beginning of her neck, but a red zigzagging line – a loose thread? – continues from the burqa through the heart, which is broken in two by the same line, mirroring pop cultural depictions of a broken heart. The piece could, thus, be taken to depict the heartbreak resulting from being forced into certain types of garments and womanhood, or the invisibility of female individuality, ache, pain, and sorrow hid, literally and figuratively, under the hyper visibility of the burqa. Read as such, the piece critiques both conservative gender norms and coalitional governments’ and international help organizations’ preoccupations with the burqa as a metonymy of all Afghan women.[[38]](#footnote-38) The mural unmistakably resembles Hassani’s general style and graffiti works which all depict large female figures with closed eyes, elongated lashes, and no mouths. They often wear colorful clothes and hold flowers or musical instruments and present poetic pockets of resistance in cityscapes characterized by the imminent danger of gendered and geopolitical violence.[[39]](#footnote-39) The absence of the mouth, the traditional instrument of democratic participation and self-assertion, may confound some viewers: Are these female figures not able or allowed to ‘speak up’ or ‘speak for themselves’? Hassani has however, in an interview, connected the absent mouths in her female figures to the empowering features of musical instruments and the non-verbal language of music: ‘She can use musical instruments to talk with people, to speak louder and [get] more attention, as she has no mouth. But the musical instrument gives her power to speak in society’.[[40]](#footnote-40) This paradox suggests a dismantling of the traditional discourses of power: to speak efficiently in and against a militarized society, these women use another language than the one used by male politicians, military commanders, insurgents, soldiers, diplomats, and NGO-workers. In Deleuzian terms we may thus conceive of these murals as lines of flight, ‘those parts of an assemblage that escape the structure of which they are a part’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Speaking and connecting through the language of music, poetry, and art, rather than politics, war, and economics, these murals work to break down the gendered structure of public space and discourse in Afghanistan and to point to transformational modes of relating and ‘speaking’.

In Hassani’s post mourning their disappearance, the short explanatory text is followed by a range of hashtags which categorize the media text according to content (#mural, #graffiti, #painting, #wall), time and place (#homeland, #kabul, #afghanistan, #warzone, #2021), and sender (#artist, #afghanartist, #homeless). Hashtags generally function as tools of categorization and as contextual guidance to readers’ interpretation of a media text.[[42]](#footnote-42) This is also the case for Hassani who, by tagging, connects her work to the broad categories/catalogs used on Instagram, especially those relating to art and graffiti, and thus makes it visible to more users exploring the platform’s content. The last tag, #homeless, in particular, carries with it an affective poignancy that suggests the isolation of exile and the despair of watching the destruction from afar. The fact that Hassani received the ‘after’-image from someone in Kabul indicates that other people in the city care enough for the piece to document its destruction and partake in the recording and continued virtual preservation of the mural. This act of care shows that even if Hassani’s work is being materially destroyed, it has made a lasting imprint on some Kabulis. However, thanks to social media, the piece’s afterlife does not solely rely on the memories of Kabul residents. According to MacDowall and de Souza, writing on how Instagram has reshaped graffiti and street art, the act of sharing the erased work online ‘gives it a second life in which images circulate among a community of interest’.[[43]](#footnote-43) In the case of street art, a site specific and easily destructible form of critical art, social media has radically changed the possible reach and preservation of these statements of dissidence. At the same time, however, Hassani subtly points out another kind of precarity surrounding these digital ghosts of urban art living on in the virtual spaces of Instagram when she writes ‘T aliban’ rather than ‘Taliban’ in the posted text. In the time around the Taliban takeover several Muslim social media users experienced having their content and even accounts removed if they used words such as ‘Taliban’ as they were seen to promote a dangerous organization by the platform’s algorithm.[[44]](#footnote-44) Hassani tries to avoid the censoring algorithm by inserting a blank space into the ‘perilous’ word and thereby also makes the audience aware of the doubled perils of censorship surrounding her work. Not only are her physical murals being painted over, but their digital traces are also in danger of being deleted by the very communication platform to which she turns in order to document and preserve them. This problem becomes even more evident when we turn to Kubra Khademi’s performative challenges to the exclusionary logics of both the traditional archive and the social media platforms themselves.

## Creating and circulating change

In the introduction, I touched upon the performance *Les Héroïnes d’aujourd’hui* where Khademi showed support for four Afghan women’s rights activists – Frozan Saafi, Fowzia Wahdat, Hoda Kamoosh, and Rokhshana Rezai – by pasting their names over the name of Ahmad Shah Massoud, Afghan military commander and resistance leader, on street signs in Paris. Khademi was later invited to recreate the performance in Roubaix where she honored other activists by the same means. The act of substituting masculine singularity with female multiplicity displays the militarized and masculinized norms of public spaces in Afghanistan as well as in Europe where most public buildings, streets, and squares are still named after male leaders and military victors. As such, Khademi’s performance directly revolts against the exclusion of women – especially Muslim women – from the archive of publicly honored persons. Khademi had invited *Le Figaro* to report from the happening itself.[[45]](#footnote-45) Their reportage was published the following day and ‘demonstrates the continued importance of established media for the diffusion of images of activism’.[[46]](#footnote-46) However, the performance was also recorded with a mobile phone camera by one of Khademi’s accomplices. These recordings show Khademi’s deed in the deserted park on a crisp January morning, and they were distributed and stored on Khademi’s Instagram profile along with the article, close-up pictures of the street signs, and portraits of the four women. The social media texts not only document but add material, information, and perspectives to the performance itself, unavailable to any ‘audience’ accidentally present in the park, to such a degree that one might ask what the actual artwork is: the live performance or the subsequent distribution and digital collection of documents, videos, and pictures? According to performance scholar Philip Auslander, this kind of performance documentation traditionally belongs to the theatrical (producing events for/through forms of documentation), rather than the documentary (recording evidence of the occurrence of an event), since it not only records a previous performance, but – due to the lack of an original audience except for the reporter, the camera operator, and by-passers – actually ‘becomes the only space in which the performance occurs’ for the broader audience.[[47]](#footnote-47) Auslander further questions the ontological distinction between performance and document when he concludes that ‘the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such’.[[48]](#footnote-48) The constitutive role of recordings and media texts is evident in Khademi’s work where they not only function as documentational traces but as performative elements in the activist artwork itself. The transgressive performance needs the recording eye to become something other than a sheer act of vandalism, to become art. *Les héroïnes* exemplifies the power of art to alter existing realities, if only for a while, and the integral role that media, and especially social media, play in its creation and distribution.

Khademi also shares more personal and explicitly activist messages, campaigns, and happenings on her profile. In the wake of a suicide bombing in Kabul killing more than 50 Hazara students, mostly young girls, Khademi used the story function, a newer function on Instagram allowing profile holders to share content for a shorter period of time before it disappears, to share information on the bombing, display personal portraits of some of the girls, and spread the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide to help mobilize international political awareness of the persecution of the Hazara minority in Afghanistan. Unless they are saved by profile holders as so-called ‘highlights’, stories disappear from the profile after 24 hours.[[49]](#footnote-49) They thus function more as a tool for mobilization and awareness-raising than for archiving and indicate the instability of the social media records.

Another aspect to consider when working with social media as a vibrant but instable form of archive is the interference and modulations of the platforms themselves mentioned earlier. With her direct form of expression and transgressive art practice, Khademi seems to have encountered the regulative power of the platform on several occasions. One such encounter was during a residency in the US where she posted a selfie flipping off the camera.[[50]](#footnote-50) The text explained her contempt for President Biden who days before had ordered the redirection of billions of dollars of Afghanistan’s frozen funds to American victims of terror:

Biden! you are the worst US president afghans have ever seen, after all the shit you did, now how could you take the $3,5 Billions of Afghan’s money to the victims of 9/11famili[e]s? […] Feeling: vomiting up on your banks Biden, Fuck you![[51]](#footnote-51)

The original post was removed by Instagram. Khademi, however, reposted not only the original picture but also the entire communication behind the removal in which Instagram in a standard communication formula informed Khademi of community guidelines. By reposting screenshots of the original post as well as Instagram’s request, Khademi makes an obvious statement against Instagram guidelines to which she refuses to adhere. However, the post also becomes a testament to the fragility of online archives of dissidence. At any point, the media platform may decide to censor, block, or even permanently ban users, thus stripping them not only of their online presence but also of access to and control over their personal records. By reposting her outcry, Khademi not only critiques exploitative geopolitical economic structures but also technosocial infrastructures that are referring her and others without the support of institutions such as national media, archives, and museums to the instable self-archiving at the mercy of global tech companies.

## Re-Claiming the everyday through the archive

The analysis so far has primarily focused on the way Instagram presents promising and problematic spaces for the circulation and archiving of activist art by exiled artists. In this last part, however, I am going to focus on how the social media profile also can become an archive of feelings and space for reclaiming the memory of the lost home. According to Ann Cvetkovich marginalized publics constituted around trauma often ‘challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive’.[[52]](#footnote-52) This means that lesbian, queer, or diaspora archives – to mention just some of the alternatives to the dominant national archive – take an unusual and ephemeral form and provide a different kind of memory-based and affective knowledge about the past. ‘These publics’, Cvetkovich argues, ‘are hard to archive because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation’.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Turning once again to the ephemeral stories on Instagram, I argue that these actually can come to constitute a central part of the vibrant archive of exile. This is the case when the profile holder chooses to save and display the stories on their profile by turning them into collections of ‘highlights’. Any highlighted stories are accessible to other users at the top of the individual profile page. The stories default temporary character means that their contents are often more prosaic and their aesthetics rawer than the polished pictures posted on the profiles of Instagram.[[54]](#footnote-54) The stories remind us of Instagram’s original endeavor to be a platform for instant visual communication[[55]](#footnote-55) – a market function which other applications such as Snapchat and BeReal has largely captured. Profile holders can categorize their highlighted stories according to subjectively meaningful categories, and on the profile of photographer and conceptual artist Rada Akbar we find the five categories ‘Press’, ‘Paris’, ‘AFG’, ‘Food’, and ‘Home•Plants’.

The category ‘AFG’ is of special interest since it contains almost 100 pictures and short film clips from Afghanistan.[[56]](#footnote-56) The highlighted and, thus, preserved stories all show different aspects of the artist’s everyday life in Afghanistan: food, trips, selfies, views, shops, cats, citizens, etc. The story function, thus, provides a digital infrastructure for the archiving of affectively meaningful moments of everyday life. In contrast to the monumentality of the artwork and the transformational vigor and critical stance of the activist campaigns, they are transient testaments to a lived experience and pervasive feelings of love, loss, and grief as they provide re-views of what has been lost. The affective tonality of the AFG-archive is enhanced by the last element in the story-collection which is a short video where the camera zooms in on a large Afghan flag on top of a hill. This, the tricolor flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, was immediately replaced by the white flag of the Taliban movement and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the Taliban’s takeover, but still functions as a sign of dissidence and disagreement with the Taliban regime; for example, on social media where users post pictures of it or use it next to their profile names. Viewing the video is deeply affected by the inescapable knowledge that this is one of the last times Akbar would enjoy this specific view of her home. The text accompanying the footage underlines the loss and attests to the trauma of war and migration: ‘today was the worst day in my life! my beloved Afghanistan collapsed before my eyes 💔 💔 💔’.[[57]](#footnote-57) The highlighted story in words and action marks the end of Akbar’s living archive of Afghanistan and the beginning of her life in exile. In Akbar’s stories, and in many other scattered digital records, however, exiled Afghans can re-view and remember the intimately known landscapes of their home country.

At the same time, the highlighted stories serve to re-claim the cultural imagining of Afghanistan. For those followers unfamiliar with Afghanistan as anything other than the tragic subject of news media and political discourse, the stories provide an unknown insight into everyday life in the Afghanistan and Kabul that existed prior to August 2021. The AFG-collection of stories shows an everyday life absent in most Western media representations of a war-ridden and deprived country from the handheld camera’s affectively engaging first-person point of view. As such, Akbar’s archive of stories claims and reframes memories of the home country and, even if they are not explicitly critical or activist, they provide a means of restructuring and transforming the media induced view of Afghanistan. They become an affectively powerful part of the counter-archive formed by the artists’ perpetual digital recordmaking and -keeping.

## Conclusion

The analysis has shown how the three Afghan activist artists not only self-reflexively partake in making records for the future, but also actively seek to preserve and keep these records on their social media profiles. Whether it is through the documentation of site-specific, destroyed and/or performative pieces, the challenge to political and platform censorship, and/or through the self-aware recording and stor(y)ing of glimpses of lost everyday life, the three female artists all partake in shaping and preserving records of their lives, works, and experiences as exiled Afghan female artists. The Instagram profiles can, thus, be viewed as a means of producing a counter-archive vibrating with agency, art, affect, and activism and rupturing mainstream media framings of Afghan women as the silent and passively suffering symbols of Western warfare. But, these ambivalent cultural memory spaces also fundamentally challenge our understandings of the longevity and stability of the traditional archive. Instagram profiles are, certainly, not eternal and the records made and kept on this platform are vulnerable due to the dependency on commercial tech companies and the continued investments and evaluations of the activist artists. Instead of disregarding the prosaic but highly self-conscious record-making and -keeping performed by the three artists on Instagram as not forming a *proper* archive, we might see it as an invitation to think more about practices than institutions, that is about supplementary forms of *archiving* rather than *archives*. Archiving can no longer be viewed as a disinterested activity performed solely by dedicated institutions and as such it is important to acknowledge and analyze how social agents partake in archiving, that is recordmaking and recordkeeping, activities on a daily basis with the means, technologies, and platforms available.

The three Instagram profiles can, thus, be said to function as vibrant *de facto* archives where art, activism, and affects are documented, preserved, and circulated, and agency, subject positions, and memories of Afghanistan are reclaimed. The analysis of the artists’ social media practices teaches us at least three things about the potentials and problems of viewing Instagram as an archival space for art activism: 1) Social media can function as a site of collaborative archival work where dissident art is circulated and preserved despite material destruction or loss. This is an especially pertinent feature of social media archiving for exiled artists having lost access to and control over any works left in their home country. 2) Social media are constitutive not only as documentational spaces but also as performative platforms for creating and circulating critical art. This makes such critical works vulnerable to external interests and platform regulations. However, as Kubra Khademi has shown, these works can also effectively critique and question the infrastructures and exclusionary powers referring artists and activists to the unstable and vibrant archiving on Instagram. 3) Social media archives question what the traditional archive must and can contain. New technological functions provide new possibilities for the preservation of the prosaic and the affectively meaningful of lived experience.

For activist artists, turning to social media hold promises of reaching a broader audience, of curatorial self-determination, of creative experimentation, and of ensuring documentation and recording of their work for the immediate future, but the problems of control, regulation, and access must not be forgotten. Instagram is a flawed *de facto* archive acting as stand-in to the exiled and marginalized agent. To preserve these works and voices beyond the tech company-controlled platforms and for the generations to come the exiled artists’ critical testaments to conflict, gender inequalities, and geopolitics must *also* be included, recorded, and kept by (digital) archives controlled not by the need to make profit, but by the archival promise to document and preserve for the future.

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30. Rebecka Edwards, ‘The Counter-Archive of Elizabeth Nielsen’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 64 (2010): 111; Ben-David, ‘Counter-archiving Facebook’. It is important to add that even if the Afghan activist artists’ records are not, to my knowledge, currently being kept by an institution (museum or archive) or organization (grassroots or State), it does not mean that archivists are blind to the challenges of archiving Afghan lives, experiences, and movements. Archivist Moska Rokay has, for example, argued for the need to create digital archives ‘with oral histories and digital artifacts’ in order for Afghan-Canadians to ‘learn about themselves’. See Moska Rokay, ‘Critical Ethnography as an Archival Tool. A Case Study of the Afghan Diaspora in Canada’, *Archivaria* 91 (2021): 198. Archivist Liladhar R. Pendse, UC Berkeley, initiated the impressive archiving of 83 websites, containing more than 846,000 individual documents, in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover to create the *At-Risk Afghanistan Web Archive* focusing on official governmental, activist, NGO, and media web sites at risk of deletion by the new government. Liladhar R Pendse, ‘Collaborating to Create the At-Risk Afghanistan Web Archive (ARAWA)’, *C&RL News* no. 2 (2022): 70–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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