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LET HER BE FREE

ICY AND SOT
STENCIL ARTISTS FROM IRAN 2006-2015

Foreword by **JESS X. CHEN**

Afterword by **STEVEN P. HARRINGTON & JAIME ROJO**



FOREWORD

A thousand pieces of cut paper litter the floor of a Brooklyn studio. They are the remains of a stencil that peels off a wall to reveal a portrait of an Iranian woman staring confidently into the horizon. Where once may have been her hijab now lingers a hundred birds about to take flight from a web of branches. When one bird soars the others will follow, signaling a great migration toward freedom.

Let Her Be Free is a foray into this woman's story as she frees herself from restrictions in her country. It is also the lens through which we may view the remarkable journey of ICY (b.1985) and SOT (b.1991), two Iranian activist-artist brothers who fled the persecution and censorship they experienced in their home country in the hopes their stencil practice may bloom.



Since the Islamic Revolution swept Iran in the 1970s, the fundamentalist government outlawed any expression that ventured outside the boundaries of its own propaganda. Religion itself is not the source of oppression; the spirituality of Islam provides beautiful culture, community, and belonging for millions of people. Rather, oppression in Iran has involved a few leaders and a government that has twisted religion to secure power over people's lives. Though many resilient activists protested, the police responded violently.

Recalling his childhood, ICY remembers, "Children are taught by their parents to fear those in power and stay out of trouble. The older generation passed down their fears to the younger generations." ICY and SOT observed discontent passersby in the streets: women

frustrated with limits to their rights; workers feeling downcast because there were no bars and only a few creative spaces for people to gather. In addition, all public exhibits of art, music, and culture had to be approved by the Iranian government. ICY and SOT remember, "Artists are some of the people most affected by Iran's censorship as their entire career is dependant on freedom of expression." Since their adolescence, ICY and SOT didn't feel at home in the current condition of their country.

It is no surprise that out of these cultural restrictions emerged a fierce counterculture. This is where the story of ICY and SOT was born. If you spent the mid-2000s in Iran's underground scene, you'd hear punk songs bursting from illegal basement concerts, see Tehran's mere handful of skateboarders, musicians, and artists gathering

in *The Frog Park*, and meet alcohol dealers in secret to find enough beer to keep the evening burning. Above each hour would hover a cloud of fear—a fear of the party being shut down, the artists being persecuted for their public expressions, young lovers interrogated for holding hands in the streets. What brought these young people together every weekend was the fact that no threat could extinguish their hunger for self-expression. "We were never followers," remembers SOT, "we just had an uncontainable energy. The only people who truly understood that were our friends." ICY recalls, "We shared with them our fondest memories in Iran."

ICY and SOT grew up in the northwestern city of Tabriz. Known as the "City of Firsts," Tabriz is the pioneer of art and literature in Iran. Iran's first printing industry, publication house, library, and public cinema was founded in Tabriz. When ICY was 20 and SOT was 14, they started skating around the city with their friends, carrying their own stickers and one-layer stencils. They gravitated toward each other because no one else permitted them to express themselves so freely. Putting stickers and stencils up illegally in alleys, public parks, and even on the facades of abandoned buildings was their small way of transforming their surroundings into a home. The brothers recall, "We chose stencils because it was the

quickest way to share our vision. We could put them up quickly without getting caught. Exhausted by feeling silenced, we were inspired when we discovered a way we could be so immediately heard and seen."

The brothers didn't know that what they were doing was called "street art." It was only after they bypassed the firewall of Iran's internet that they discovered the work of street artists such as Banksy, MCity, and Blek Le Rat. Taking inspiration from the politically-charged street work going on worldwide, ICY and SOT developed a stylistically raw iconography that spanned themes such as child labor rights, freedom of speech, freedom to protest, and anti-censorship. Their images were animated by the curiosity and playfulness of children who had not yet experienced the full restrictions of daily life in Iran.

On typical Fridays mornings in Tabriz, SOT would help ICY hold up a stencil of a mother embracing a child who clutches bold letters that spell out "Peace" in Farsi. When one brother would push the paint through the stencil, the other would keep watch for police. When Monday morning came, their art would be buffed cleanly off the city wall by a paramilitary volunteer. The next evening, the brothers would bring an original piece to be wheat-pasted, such as a little boy in prayer, on the eight-hour bus ride to the capital city of Tehran.



They'd spend the day skating around, looking for the most public but safest wall. When night fell, they'd quickly wheatpaste the piece. By morning the art would be painted over in a coat of white. The cycle would repeat itself a hundred times over.

In Iran, five-story images of state leaders and religious symbols can last for years, while ICY and SOT's pieces would not last longer than 24 hours. While their work would quickly disappear from public view, its traces would be preserved in photography. The brothers remember, "There was nobody documenting street art in Iran, so we had to quickly snap photos of our art the moment it was done." They would extend the life of their art by posting photographs of it to Flickr's online street art community. Slowly, their work reached global audiences through social media and art blogs.

One may ask: why would these brothers continue the pursuit of art at great risk to their well-being? In the times they were caught putting up a piece, the consequences included accusations of satanism, lashes, and short-term imprisonments. The brothers confess, "One thing was always for certain: there was no better feeling than walking away safely from a piece we just put up." Perhaps they also persisted because they believed that what they were doing couldn't possibly be a crime. That when the public imagery of

a city does not reflect the diverse experiences and opinions of its citizens, new faces must adorn its streets. That when a society's laws no longer serve the human spirit, they must be broken. ICY and SOT's work affirms that the call of the activist-artist is to operate on a higher moral compass than the law and to paint publicly the truth that their society desperately tries to conceal.

While the public dimension of ICY and SOT's journey is aimed at truth, creativity, and expression, the intimate side is one of unconditional brotherhood. Regardless of the struggle or hardship, the brothers rose back up together, always ready to cut the next stencil. The support of their parents was also a key part of their persistence. SOT remembers, "When our parents found out their sons were beginning to do illegal street art they became extremely concerned for our safety." "We owe everything to our parents," ICY remarks. "They would always be the first to organize a bail for us, but never once told us to stop pursuing our art."

Six years into their street art crusade, however, the brothers knew that their capacity to wriggle out of imprisonment again and again was not infinite. In 2012, a solo show in New York City granted them U.S. visas to leave Iran for the first time. The brothers saw this as an opportunity to migrate to the US. Mere days

prior to boarding the plane, the brothers faced an arrest that deeply endangered their careers. They knew then that once they left the Iranian government would never kindly welcome them back.

Their migration continues a legacy of underground Iranian artists fleeing the cultural policing of their homeland for a future where they may create art and live free of restriction. ICY and SOT moved into a Brooklyn flat that was inhabited by the Yellow Dogs, their old friends from the underground punk music scene in Iran. This flat was the place where albums were written, novels were born, parties were thrown--this time, legally. Bound together by similar refugee journeys, everyone who lived in this flat became each other's closest reminders of home.

In New York, painting and living alongside their friends, ICY and SOT began to take the street art scene by storm. They were able to attend their own shows in person for the first time. As they got invited to paint larger and larger walls, their stencils increased in both complexity and breadth regarding sociopolitical content. They started painting murals across the United States, Turkey, Germany, China, Norway, and more, each piece now staying up for years on end. With their new connections, they organized a joint show that drew a constellation that connected street artists in Tehran with street

artists in NYC. Opening on the same day, the Tehran-NYC show was the first time that thirty-five New York street artists had their work shown in Iran and that fifteen Iranian street artists showed their work in NYC. This event continued ICY and SOT's dream of empowering street artists from their home country and bridging the two worlds.

Although they found in the United States new opportunities for the production and display of their work, ICY and SOT observed and experienced great violence. In the US, where private gun ownership rates are the highest in the world, ICY and SOT lost three of their best friends to gun violence. Their art suddenly became a means of continuing the pursuits their friends were unable to finish. Their powerful series of murals about anti-gun ownership began appearing on New York City walls and even illegally replacing bus stop ads. Ali, Arash, and Soroush are immortalized within every stencil by ICY and SOT. Their resilient spirits soar alongside the brothers, stretching toward the dreams of which they all sang of and believed in when they left Iran.

The brothers also observed that the oppression, fundamentalism, and persecution in Iran exist in the United States as well, just in different forms. The brothers saw that vast parts of the U.S. population are not free and live in a

state of fear. They witnessed anti-black police brutality, experienced the country's Islamophobia and xenophobia, saw the ways corporate capitalism bears power over everyone's daily lives, learned how gentrification pushes people of color out of their neighborhoods, and became aware of the devastating effects of climate change on the Earth. These new issues found their way into ICY and SOT's work, as they continued to use their art to advocate for human rights. In stencils, ICY and SOT have developed a lens to look violence in the eye, make compassion visible, and champion struggle with grace: the paper stencil, hand-cut and held together by the thinnest of slivers, is their most concentrated voice of resistance.

* * *

The book in your hands has been made possible through the immense, unfaltering love of ICY and SOT's parents, the brothers' chosen family, their friends and supporters around the world who have found inspiration in their work, and the millions who have been affected by the art gathered here. The pages of this book are bound by a decade of brotherhood, sweat, and blood. Its spine stretches six thousand miles across oceans and mountains, from Tabriz to Brooklyn. Its images are brought to us by the tireless documentation of the brothers and their friends. Its pages are borne from the insatiable

hunger of the brothers to share with us a vision of equality and freedom.

When shone through with just the right light, the thousands of holes cut through the stencil could also be called the stars. When the stencil is peeled away, it frees a segment of the liberated world beneath the one we live in. What does *freedom* look like? On a wall in Germany, freedom is the five-story-tall face of a woman gazing back at us with dignity. Her skin is stenciled with communities of people protesting for her existence. When you observe the journey of migrants, it is apparent that freedom is a fire that no country can gift and that no prison cell can extinguish. Its flame burns wildly within us. When you ask ICY and SOT, they say "Freedom looks like true happiness. If she existed, our work would be done."

ICY and SOT's work cracks open a window into a world where children run free, women own all the choices in their lives, and there are no guns, no borders, no hierarchies, and no war. You can catch glimpses of this world in the pages that follow this one. Even if we may never live this vision in our lifetimes, ICY and SOT show us what it looks like to have fought and dreamed beautifully.

JESS X. CHEN
artist, filmmaker, activist

TABRIZ

2006-2012

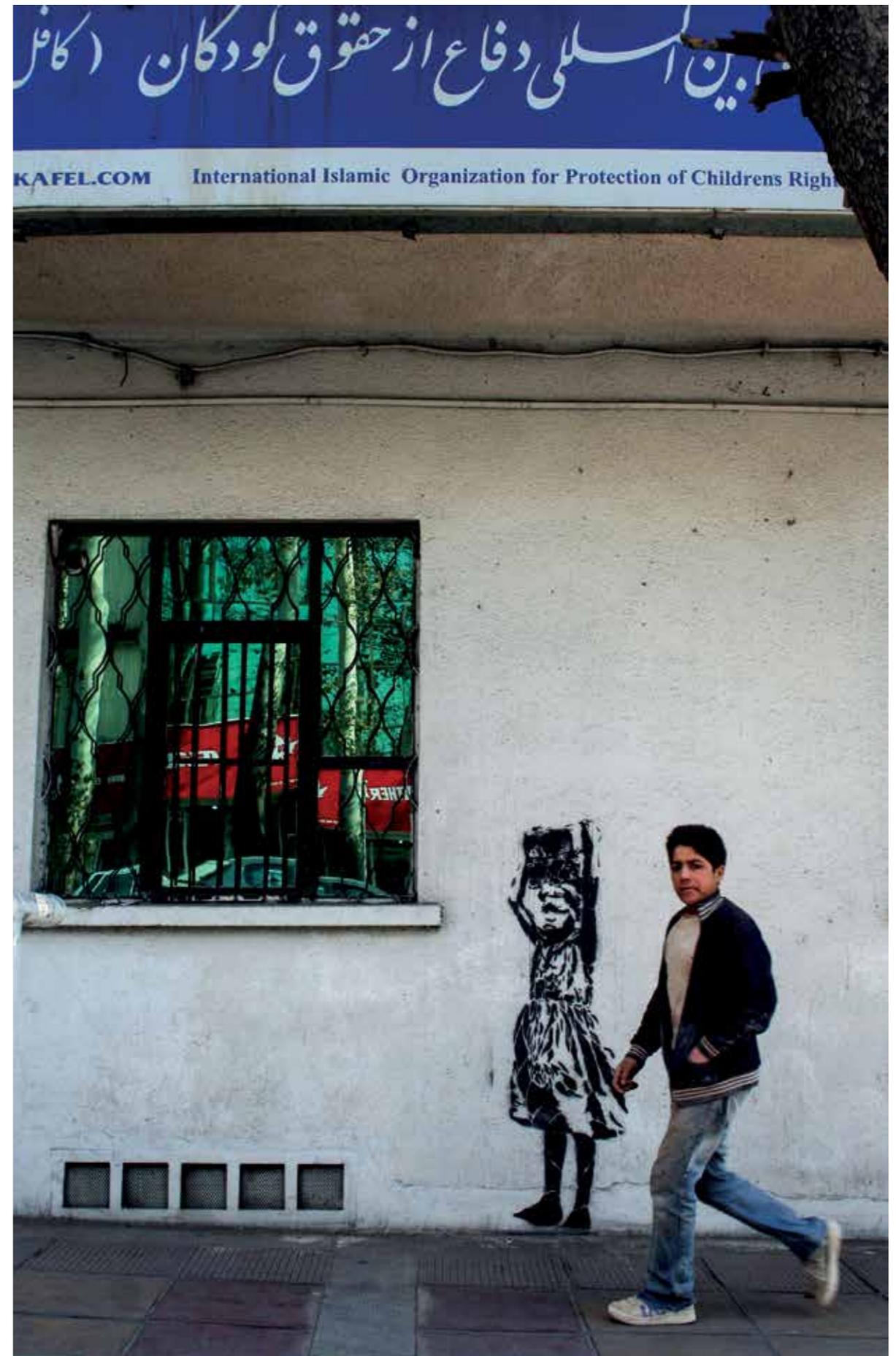








“In Iran, everything has been censored for more than 25 years. We try to reflect the unspoken emotions of the people around us in our art.” – *Icy and Sot*













“We felt like people could easily relate to the subjects we addressed if we used children to talk about them. We addressed issues like child labor, censorship and the violence of war. Some pieces just depicted the stressful reality and others depicted the subjects with a sense of peace that was absent in their real life.” – *Icy and Sot*
