

darkmatter hub • Issue-17 Woman, Life, Freedom: The Sounds of A Revolution

Architecture as Performative Space: Coventry Cathedral and the Sounds of a Revolutionary Episode

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The Ruins, Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: A Hakimejad, 2022.

On May 20, 2023, the sounds of a ‘revolutionary episode’ (Bayat, 2022) in Iran filled the vast volume and shifting light of the Coventry Cathedral; a charming piece of architecture at the heart of a once-blitzed British city that is Coventry.

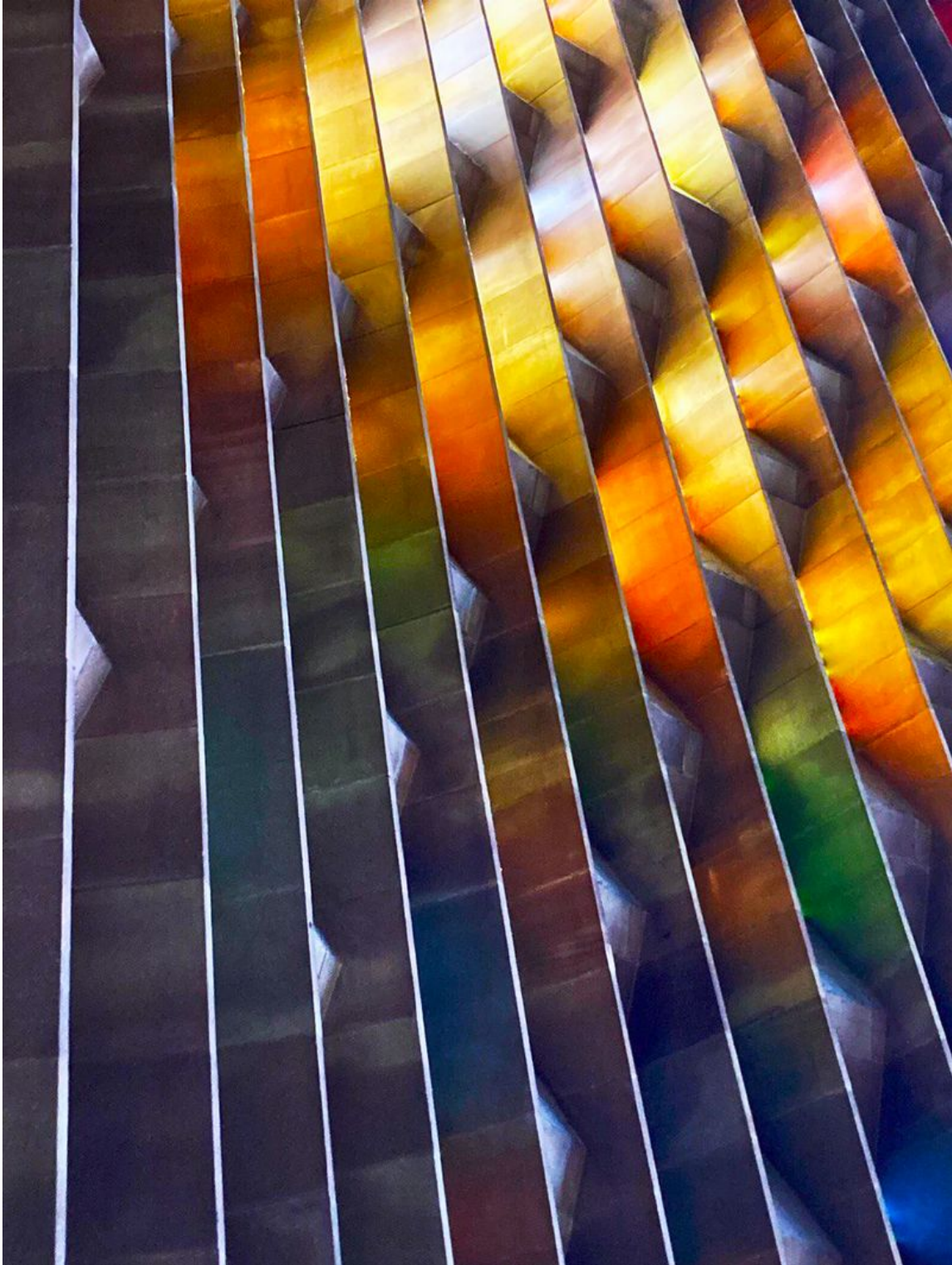
Walking towards The Ruins, one can see the leaky shell of the cathedral with its spire, serene and voiceless, on one side. The glassless windows and porous red-grey burned skin of the ruins are reminders of the bombing raid on Coventry that took place on November 14, 1940. Looking at the roofless mass, one cannot help but think of the war, the pain of the loss of lives, the tragedy of destruction and memories of a now ruined place. It is even possible to imagine the smells of burnt and saturated timber and brick dust after the bombardment.

On the other side, however, sits heavily on the ground, a fine piece of Modernist architecture, a huge mass constructed of variegated purple, red and brown Hollington sandstone that has been named the New Cathedral. Designed by Basil Spence in the mid-twentieth century (1954-1962), the aim was to emphasise its symbolic character by juxtaposing the new cathedral building with the ruins of the old, along a central axis with a north-south orientation, which according to Hoare and Sweet (2000) was unusual for Christian architecture in Britain. Between the ruins and the [re]built cathedral is a high concrete porch, with the canopy supported on 10 pillars to create a semi-open/semi-closed transitory space that fills the gap between the steps leading down from the north side of the ruin to the entrance of the new cathedral; a sheer glass wall engraved with figures of saints and angels.



The Ruins, Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: A Hakimejad, 2022.

Standing for a moment in this transitory space, brings the sound of a female voice that fades in. Her singing voice encourages the bodies to go inside the cathedral, towards discovery: some twenty-three-metre-high vault of the nave in front; a blaze of light framed and islanded in colour from the variety and size of the pieces of glass occupying a curved space on the right; and four steps and a wide corridor within the concrete wall on the left. All create a moment of silence, stillness and detachment from the space, until the female voice brings the body back into the cathedral. Her voice is part of a sound loop created from seven revolutionary songs produced during the Woman, Life, Freedom mobilisations in Iran. The words are in Farsi: “*Ya ham-e ba ham, Ya ham-e tanha...*”, which translates literally as “*Either we are all together or we are all alone...*”. Her sound is amplified in the Cathedral as part of a multi-sensory event that echoes the sounds - and words - of this feminist mobilisation in Iran, through art, literature, reading, performance and music. The event is entitled *Woman, Life, Freedom: The Sounds of a Revolution*.



Baptistry Window, Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: A Hakiminejad, 2023.



West Screen; a view from within the New Cathedral framing The Ruins. Photo credit: A
Hakiminejad, 2023.



"*Bella Ciao*" (Iranian Version) is playing before the event starts at Coventry Cathedral. The song is part of a sound loop made of six revolutionary songs related to Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



Sahar Zibaie rehearsing a Kurdish Lullaby before the event starts at Coventry Cathedral (Roshi Rouzbehani's poster is shown on the screen). Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

On September 13, 2022, a twenty-two-year-old woman was detained by the so-called morality police in Tehran, Iran. She was taken into custody for what is called 'improper hijab' and was found by her family a few hours later, in a hospital bed, in a coma and fighting for her life. The woman died. Her name was Mahsa Jina Amini. She was from the Kurdish city of Saqqez. In response to her death, at midday on 17 September 2022,

thousands of women and men filled the Aychi cemetery on the outskirts of Saqqez to bury her body under the pile of soil that – historically – is fertile with resistance. On that day, women collectively removed their headscarves in a public space, arguably for the first time since 1984, when mandatory hijab became law in Iran. They chanted *Jin, Jîyan, Azadî* – a Kurdish slogan of the women’s freedom movement in the early 1990s. Mahsa’s death in custody went beyond Kurdistan to ignite a nation-wide protest across and outside Iran. People filled the streets of different cities across different countries, women removed or burnt their hijabs to express their bodily autonomy and to claim the right to choose what to wear in the city’s public spaces. They cut their hair in solidarity with other protesters and re-defined the relationship between the top-down production of space and the female body in Iran. To disrupt authority, different forms of political arts and performative acts mushroomed to challenge the predefined meanings and feelings associated with the authoritarian space of Iranian cities.

Thousands of miles away from Iran, Coventry Cathedral became a performative stage, not just to echo the unheard voices of protestors of a faraway land, but also to redirect attention from the misery of the present to the promise of the future. This was, in fact, also the mission of the cathedral’s architect, who won a competition for encouraging the people of the ruined post-war city to focus not on the present but on the promise of the future; rebuilding, reconstructing and replanting the present. For Spence, the debate about a kind of society that needed to come into being as a community was inextricably linked with the idea of reconstruction. In time, this piece of architecture was transformed into a platform on which to project the sacrifice, resurrection, reconciliation, connection, and resistance of many communities.

Woman, Life, Freedom; The Sounds of a Revolution was designed from the perspective of academic and artistic activism to reflect performances and activism in different places in Iran and to develop a spatial and sensory interaction between bodies and architecture in Coventry Cathedral. Nine artists and speakers took the stage; their performances filled the space with a multi-media projection and a mixture of sounds.



Audience of the Woman, Life, Freedom event, Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

Sitting in front of the stage while feeling the heaviness of the reinforced concrete structure on the vault, ‘*Baraye*’ opened the event with its calm yet revolutionary tone to redirect the audience’s attention and to transform the space. Literally meaning ‘For’, *Barye* is a song by Shervin Hajipour composed of tweets that express the reasons why Iranian people took part in the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom protests, on what they have lost and what they hope to achieve. It is a song of past, present and future for Iranian people. In between the twenty-three-metre-high masonry walls (between inside and outside) that appeared strong and brutalist in supporting the roof and vault, *Baraye* prepared the bodies sitting within the intimate re-arrangement of the chairs in the space for their journey into a revolutionary space.



'Baraye' by Shervin Hajipour, Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

On a stage that faces the silhouetted ruined cathedral from the West Screen, an Iraqi Kurdish female musician in traditional white attire played harp to open the floor for sensory interaction between the bodies and the architectural space. Tara Jaff's performance was a performance of sorrow, despair and pain; a sensory integration into the perception of the loss of so many lives during the Woman, Life, Freedom mobilisations; nearly 550 protestors including sixty-eight children and forty-nine women were killed during the 2022 protests (Iran Human Right, 2023).



Tara Jaff playing Harp at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



Tara Jaff playing Harp at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



An excerpt from Tara Jaff's performance at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

Then came the image! Roshanak Rouzbehani, an Iranian female artist, screened her digital illustrations to foster the marginalised voices of women in Iran through image, and to echo their strength and resilience in challenging the restrictions and promoting gender equality (Rouzbehani, 2023). Her artworks develop a methodological approach; art as activism that uses colours, texts, images, motifs, signs and patterns to connect the society inside Iran with the community inside Coventry Cathedral. Rouzbehani explored a visual medium that shaped among the audience a new perception of Iranian women's everyday struggle against the authorities.



Roshi Rouzbehani presentation on visual arts as a form of resistance in Coventry Cathedral.
Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



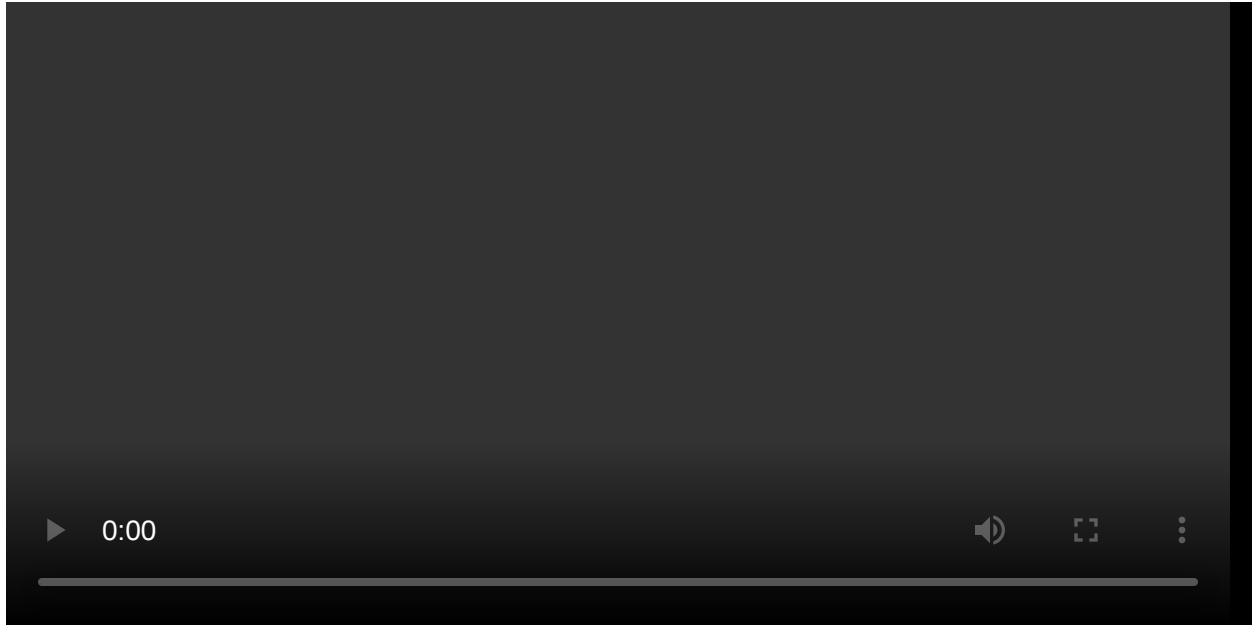
An excerpt from Roshi Rouzbehani's talk at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

An eleven-minute sonic piece was the next multisensory medium used to connect the present to the past through sound and text. Made in collaboration with a Coventry-based sound artist, Duncan Whitley, *Woman, Life, Freedom: The Sounds of a Revolution* is a multi-media sound work that depicts the Iranian women's struggle against the tyrannical Iranian regime that has been in power since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. To do so, eleven *sounds* have been extracted from recordings of the 1979, 2009, 2021 and the 2022 protests shared on social media from within Iran. The accompanying text, in white colour against the black background of a twenty-six-inch screen, situates the sounds within their historical, geographic and political contexts. The imageless piece used the acoustic of the cathedral to transform it into a highly political space through sound. It began with the chants of women from the 1979 International Women's Day march against Khomeini's mandatory hijab decree, among which is: 'we didn't make a revolution to go backwards.' Then came the moment of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan, a 26-year-old philosophy student who was fatally shot by a police officer while returning to her car after protesting against the disputed presidential election in Tehran in 2009. A male voice, extracted from the video – shouting 'don't be afraid; don't be afraid Neda! press it [the wound]; stay Neda! stay' – filled the vast space of the cathedral with anxiety, confusion and anger, creating an unsettling experience of time and space for the audience. This unsettling consciousness intensified when in one of the following episodes, the text was removed and only the sound remained in the singing of Nika Shakarami and Shouresh Niknam's mother. Their voices were echoed in the void. Nika Shakarami, sixteen years old, and Shouresh Niknam, who was thirty-three, were both killed by the regime forces during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Here in this sound piece, the young Nika cheerfully singing an Iranian song from a 1968 film, *Soltan-e Ghalbha* (the King of Hearts), while Shouresh's mother mourning at the grave of her son in the Kurdish city of Mahabad, West Azerbaijan, singing a traditional lullaby that reflects on the Kurdish women's

resistance. The architectural elements of space – material, scale, light, proportion – generated an enclosed space for the interplay of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’. During the screen of this sound piece, the cathedral became an empty void that was constantly filled, emptied and re-filled with sound. A disturbing consciousness integrated what Lefebvre would call the conceived (the architectural plan and organisation of space), perceived (the audience’s sensory experience of sitting, watching and listening) and lived (the audience’s feelings and imaginations of experiencing sounds in a void) spaces all at once (see Lefebvre’s spatial triad, 1991).



Audience at the Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

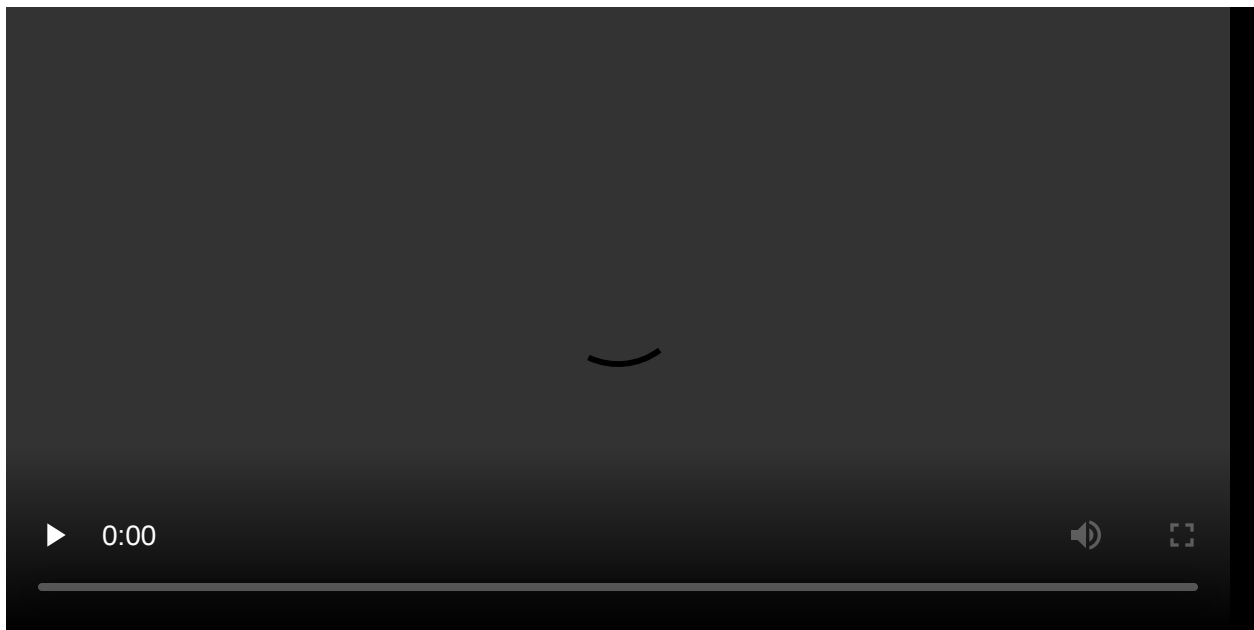


An excerpt from 'Woman, Life, Freedom; The Sounds of A Revolution' at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

Next was Fariba Borhanzehi (aka Fariba Balouch), a Balouch-Iranian female activist, whose political speech in Farsi, accompanied by a multi-media presentation in English, created a slow and attentive engagement of bodies with the politics of space and place within the geographies of southeast Iran. Reflecting on the systematic production of non-citizens and oppression of ethnic minorities in Sistan and Baluchestan province, her speech promoted an altered imagination of the socio-political dynamics of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, in which the Islamic regime brutally killed more than ninety individuals in Zahedan in a single day, September 30, 2022, which has become known as the Zahedan Massacre.



Fariba Balouch speech on the systemic oppression of people in Baluchistan at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



An excerpt from Fariba Balouch's Talk at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

This temporal mood of anxiety reached a melancholic moment when Sahar Zibaie, an Iranian Kurdish female singer, re-enacted a grieving mother singing a Kurdish lullaby at the grave of her son, Amir Tahaie, who was fatally shot by the regime forces during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in Piranshahr, West Azerbaijan province of Iran. Facing the ruins, dressed in black with a Kurdish keffiyeh on her shoulder, Sahar explored a spatial interaction with the architecture and acoustics of Coventry Cathedral, using the vastness of a cathedral to communicate visually, and the enveloping reverberation of the space to communicate aurally. Singing with the microphone being turned off, she embodied a conscious act of mourning, created a dark mood of melancholy and re-defined the relation between time and space for the audience, who could unconsciously perceive what a mother in Mahabad has lost.



Sahar Zibaie singing a Kurdish lullaby at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



Sahar Zibaie singing a Kurdish Lullaby at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

The melancholic mourning momentum took a turn towards anger when Mahsa Alami Fariman, an Iranian female academic, read a letter to Minoo, a woman who continually protested in the streets of Tehran, until she was shot in the face by the security forces. Before every protest, Minoo would send a goodbye message in a WhatsApp sound recording to Mahsa in case she got fatally shot or arrested. Reflecting on the tone of these WhatsApp messages, Mahsa explored the affective dimensions of the revolution within the digital boundaries. She explained how the tone of Minoo's voice transformed as the protests accelerated; from being a frightened protestor at the beginning to a courageous leader of one of the protests in following weeks. Echoing Minoo's voice in a cathedral that symbolises the recovery of a country from war, Mahsa explored the transformative nature of the Woman, Life, Freedom subject; women as a symbol of bravery.



Mahsa Alami Fariman reading a letter to the protesters of Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

Paying attention to the volume of the whole space, Joseph Conway, a British poet, performed an interactive piece that rejected patriarchy on a more global scale. Standing at the edge of the choir, between the nave and the altar, Joseph led some 150 audience in repeating and echoing the *Woman, Life, Freedom* in rhythm, each time after reading a verse of his poem. His composition developed a dialogue between protestors inside Iran and audiences inside Coventry Cathedral. The echoing of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' enabled the audience to become active, allowing the perceived space of the cathedral to be transformed into a revolutionary lived space containing hopes for a better future.



Joseph Conway performance for Woman, Life, Freedom at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

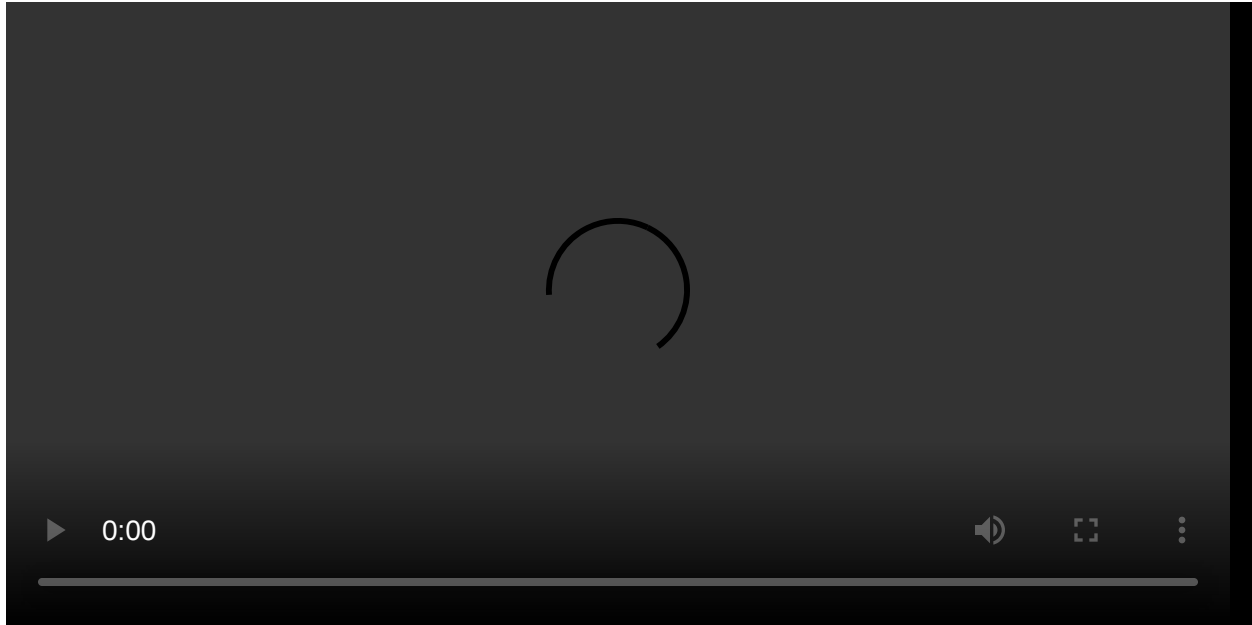


An excerpt from Joseph Conway's Performance at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

To activate alternative imaginaries for a better future, Kaveh Abbasian, an Iranian academic, artist and activist, reflected on the importance of grassroots solidarity initiated by the diasporic Iranian community who formed networks of support around the world during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. In his account of these initiatives he spoke of the *Association of Iranian Film and Theatre Artists Abroad*, which enabled the production of a borderless collective who wished to communicate, organise and transform the dynamics of the production, circulation and modification of revolutionary space. In a place of reconciliation in the post-war period of UK, Kaveh spoke of the foundations of a community that is physically dispersed but united virtually.



Kaveh Abbasian talking on the importance of organisational solidarity at the times of revolutions at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



An excerpt from Kaveh Abbasian's Talk at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

Finally, there came a community whistling choir. Aliaskar Abarkas, an Iranian artist, led a walk towards the colourful Baptistry Window, designed by the artist John Piper, which forms a permeable skin between inside and outside to allow light to pass through. The mass of blue at the top of the window, with its star-like and comet-like splinters and echoes of yellow and red seems to be a symbol of infinity. The red of the outer borders intensifies the blueness, which counter-change downwards through purples to blue at the bottom, against the cushion of reds and browns in the main lower part of the window, where Aliaskar whistled a revolutionary song and walked between the standing bodies, who listened carefully to find the rhythm of the whistle to collaborate in the production of a revolutionary art. The central blaze of white and pale yellow of the window, cushioned by the surrounding dark yellows, ochres, golds, umbers and siennas that graduate downwards into green and greys and other browns, allowed inside the dazzle and excitement of the outside, helping Aliaskar to produce communication, conviviality, embodied and collective experience through the playful sounds of the whistling bodies. Aliaskar created new possibilities and soundscapes in the cathedral by using the permeable space of the Baptistry Window and the common language of whistling as means to bring people together and express solidarity. In front of a window through which light and colour flows and sweeps across to blur the edges between the visible inside and invisible outside, the community of whistling choir transcended the conventions of a specific place and time and rendered visible the interconnectedness between the two different geographies.



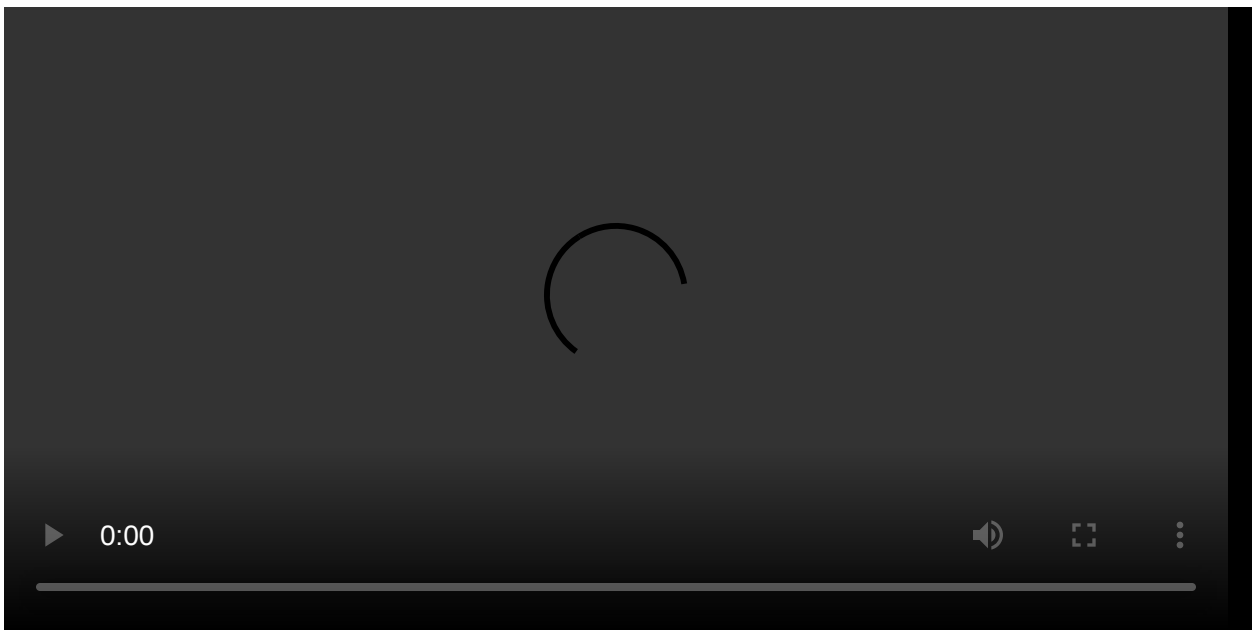
Aliaskar Abarkas performing the community whistling coir at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



Aliaskar Abarkas performing the community whistling coir at Coventry Cathedral. Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



Audience of the Woman, Life, Freedom event at the Baptistery Window, Coventry Cathedral.
Photo credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.



An excerpt from Aliaskar Abarkas' performance at Coventry Cathedral. Video credit: Hesam Ghavami & Morteza Faraji, 2023.

To close the event, the chair of the event read a poem by Forough Farukhzad, an Iranian poet who wrote of/from the body, and of revolutions and revolutionary voices. It was through the voice that Forough could imagine a way out of the loathsome night. Forough finishes her apocalyptic poem, terrestrial verses, with these lines:

O, Imprisoned voice!

Will the glory of your despair

Ever be a tunnel towards light

Through the walls of this loathsome night?

Oh, imprisoned voice!

Oh, last of all voices...

‘Woman, Life, Freedom; The Sounds of a Revolution’ event created an opportunity to echo pain, rage, and anger, but also of community, solidarity, sisterhood, hope and resistance. As Sepide Rashno, an Iranian writer and artist who was arrested, tortured and forced to confess on state TV for defying a compulsory hijab order had reminded us only a few days before the event: “We are standing! The only thing more beautiful than freedom, is to stand for freedom.”

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