

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: NASRIN TABATABAI & BABAK AFRASSIABI

Nasrin Tabatabai & Babak Afrassiabi

Seep

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Katie Guggenheim: I wanted to start by asking you both about your collaboration, under the name Pages. You have been working together since 2004 to produce the magazine, also called Pages. There have been eight issues so far, and the ninth issue is due later this year. I'd like to know about the relationship between the magazine and the other projects you work on together, your exhibition at Chisenhale included. How did you start working together? Did you begin with the magazine?

Nasrin Tabatabai: Our collaboration started in 2004, as you said. We had the idea of starting a bilingual magazine in Farsi and English. During this time, there was also an invitation from Witte de With art centre in Rotterdam, and with them we published the first issue titled *Public and Private*. At the same time we thought to present some of the artistic materials that we gathered while working on the magazine into an exhibition. These included documentary films and photographic works by Iranian filmmakers and photographers selected around the same topic as the magazine. We also collaborated with a young theatre group in Iran and made video documentation of their rehearsals which was shown in the exhibition.

KG: So it started simultaneously? You started publishing Pages at the same time as you had your first collaborative exhibition?

NT: Well, the exhibition at Witte de With was more an extension of the magazine – an extension of our editorial approach into the exhibition space with works there that were not directly our own work. From there it felt necessary to bring our ideas to other formats and other ways of presentation, but some kind of relationship always existed. Sometimes, our ideas first come together in an exhibition and then this can develop into an issue of the magazine, or maybe topics from the magazine develop further into an exhibition.

KG: Is the magazine a way for you to keep in touch with colleagues: artists and academics for example in Iran, because you're working internationally?

Babak Afrassiabi: In a way it is. For every new issue the content is produced in Iran as much as in Rotterdam - where we work and are based. We also stay for a period of time in Iran to do research and we engage in discussions, which also determines, to some extent, the content, direction and editorial approach of each issue.

NT: A lot of the time the subjects that occupy our minds and our interests – as artists living outside Iran – relate to the current discussions among different cultural practitioners living inside Iran. Working with the magazine has brought us more awareness and has affected our own artistic practice.

KG: Your exhibition at Chisenhale, Seep, has developed from your research into two archives which document two different relationships between Iran and a European, Western Modernism: the British Petroleum archive relating to that company's operations in Iran when it was known as the Anglo Iranian Oil Company, and the collection of Modern Western Art belonging to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. The interest for you seems to hinge on the fact that both the archives have been suspended: discontinued or removed somehow. What interests you about this suspension, as a shared characteristic of both archives?

BA: Maybe it's more about the temporal and historical stage in which each archive is defined. If we focus on the documents in the BP archive related to the making of the film, *Persian Story* – the oil company's final production. Somehow these documents depict and rearticulate a much more intense, focused and meaningful moment in the archive's relationship with its geographical context. It's the same with the collection: the moment in which it was withdrawn into the basement storage area of the museum is the moment in which it gained a relationship with its immediate socio-political context. This opens up a consideration of the whole idea of a collection and of collecting and archiving in general, but within a specific historical context, which in this case is the Iranian context. Maybe you can talk about this with other archives or collections: perhaps there is a certain moment in the existence of an archive where it becomes intensified through its relationships.

KG: So in both cases it seems like a decrease in visibility leads to an increased presence. Is it when a rupture occurs in the historical continuum of the archive, a point where something goes wrong... that is the moment

when it's able to connect to its context?

BA: I don't think it's a matter of right or wrong, it's more a moment of intensity, when something is revealed through this relationship with its context. Such a Modernist collection was a means for the Tehran Contemporary Museum to associate itself with the Iranian cultural climate, with the West and with a certain idea of the contemporary. But in fact, we would say, that when it was withdrawn – when the collection became invisible – that was when it became contemporary, or when it regained a certain contemporaneity.

KG: And in the case of the suspension of the other archive, the BP archive?

BA: Towards the last years of the archive, from the early 1940s until 1951 when the company had to evacuate Iran, you could say that it became a staged archive. In the beginning it was purely documenting the company's activities but towards the end, more often it was depicting staged and fictitious situations. If you read the correspondence – the letters and telegrams sent between the filmmaker and the company around the making of the film, *Persian Story* – you can sense that their attempts to establish the fictitious narrative of the archive are coming to an end. But then it became impossible to make the film because of the political dispute around oil and the closure of the Abadan refinery that was the central subject of the film. The filmmaker actually faced lots of difficulties. One of the terms he used is 'unfilmability'; and this notion of unfilmability is a moment where the archive as a whole is being redefined in relationship to its geopolitical context.

KG: In both cases there is a negation of the visual – the collection of Modern Western Art is no longer on display, and the subject of the BP film is 'unfilmable'.

NT: Of course, we are not suggesting that the collection has never been shown after the revolution – it has been shown sporadically, but not as systematically as a museum would normally display their collection. It has been on view on some occasions since 2003, but still – it doesn't change the issue, you know? The collection, even if it is displayed, somehow remains invisible. Similarly, the film, *Persian Story*, was finally made, but it was made in a different way than was initially intended.

In the installation we are also presenting *List in Progress* (2012) detailing the contents of the Western collection, as far as we could put it together. The list is indexed by the measurements of the works rather than their title or the name of the artist. By doing this we wanted to shift the focus onto the volume and the space that these works occupy, rather than their art historical relations. For the scale model of the museum, *Sloping Corridors* (2012), we focused on the interior skeleton of the museum – the corridors and ramps that lead to the basement – and excluded the exhibition areas and the galleries.

KG: I'm particularly interested in the way that you have combined all these different approaches – the two very different videos, Seep - 1 and Seep - 2 (both 2012); the model, which is at once representational and very abstract, the documents, in the form of the lists and letters, the archival objects, which also function as props, and how you refer to all these very different things as one installation with the collective title, Seep.

BA: Yes, in terms of genre we are showing works that reference different aesthetic or representational strategies, but the choice was actually about how the whole installation also functions as an exhibition. It is a comment on the exhibition as a format of display. For instance, in the first video that is based around the BP archive, *Seep - 1*, you see a fictional depiction enacted within a theatrical set. The voice, which reads the letter from the filmmaker, sets out the discrepancy between the visual materials of the archive and the real situation in which he was shooting. What is unfilmable here is in fact the archive.

We've taken some of the objects from the film set, reappropriated and displayed them so they become more like sculptures. You can say that, on the one hand, they reference the genre of sculpture through which they are placed within art history. On the other hand, another way in which they are associated with history is through the fictional space of the film set which references the BP archive.

NT: In a way the filmmaker always stayed within the enclosure of the archive. That was the idea we wanted to present in *Seep - 1*.

KG: Why did you take such a different approach to the subject matter of the second video, Seep - 2, which you have described as a kind of 'road movie' and which has the feeling of a home movie?

NT: *Seep - 2* is documenting our trip to south west Iran. The video looks at the areas where the actual archive took place. We don't give any particular information about the locations that we visit. At one point we arrive at a natural oil seepage, which has existed for many years. It was almost overwhelming to see that the oil has existed autonomously for centuries like this, in spite of the archive. This encounter influenced how we brought the whole project together, and provided the title of the project: *Seep*. At the same time it also came to define the structure of the video we made which echoes the flow of the oil seep.

BA: We revisit the site of the archive sixty years after its production. It's the geographical site of a historical misplacement and we felt that the oil seep provided a way into this historical rupture existing between the place and the archive.

KG: Maybe one of the things that makes it so striking is that it's un-industrial – we're not used to seeing oil outside of the context of its industrial extraction and use and the enormous impact this has on the world, but in your video you show that it is a natural occurrence.

NT: Yes, there are fish peacefully swimming under the oil that floats on the water.

KG: Could you talk a bit about Untitled (2013), the new prints that you've made by applying paper directly to the surface of water where oil is floating? They weren't in the first presentation of the installation at MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art Barcelona) but they have clearly developed from this work.

NT: In our most recent trip to Iran, earlier this year, we went again to south west Iran to the same area where we shot the footage of the oil seeps in the video. We made some direct imprints of the oil seeps on the river.

BA: They also capture a moment in the flow and in that way they are also about archiving; and again the idea of withdrawal, which is an inherent aspect of any archive.

KG: The installation, Seep, was first shown at MACBA in Spain but it seems quite significant to show the work here because of the connections with the UK via BP – the Anglo Iranian oil company and the British Petroleum

company. What are your hopes for how this work will engage with this context and with a UK audience?

BA: We are very curious to see how people will respond to this work, because it's a shared history. For instance, when the Anglo Iranian Oil Company first came into existence it was a time when there was a shift from using coal to oil in the British navy. Oil has had a role in the modernisation of Europe in general. The work is not only talking about the Iranian context, in fact the archives we are working with are Western archives, but considered from a different point of view, geographically and also historically. I think it will be interesting to see how it is received and read in the UK.

KG: Where will you take this body of research next?

NT: At the moment we are working on the next issue of our magazine, *Pages*, which will be titled 'Seep'. Some of the materials from the BP archive and the museum will be entering the magazine but we also have other kinds of contributions, which are not directly related to these. We hope that we can do a few days of research at the BP archives whilst we are in London.

BA: The idea is for the magazine to be a kind of continuation of where we are at the moment with the installation. Neither the BP archive nor the collection will define the editorial basis of the magazine, instead, like the installation, the central element that implicitly binds everything together will be the oil seep. The magazine will consider 'seep' as an idea of archiving or an archival practice. Something that we would like to do for this issue is to let the magazine have a more material presence, in terms of design and printing... in this sense it connects to the new work we are showing at Chisenhale – these imprints of oil.

Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, April 2013. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.