

Conversation on Locating Conflict

NANNA HEIDENREICH + NICOLE WOLF

*Where is this place?**

Happy to report that Iran is still going strong, regardless of my updating or not.

She, who writes from Iran, tells me she experiences the question of emotions, the emotional illiteracy/literacy divide, as a major obstacle in the process of translation between here and there. I understand what she is talking about as I am on the 'there' side of this divide and am concerned about it, about the divide: what ways of relating can we come up with to negotiate it, to bridge this divide?

I am usually very wary of pathos, for instance of the use of affect and emotion in political cinema, even though I am intensely critical of a mere 'contentism'. The lack of emotional language in my politics is, of course, specific for a time and place, it entails specific details that make up the grid of my place of 'enunciation', and it is this specificity that makes it difficult for the images and accounts to travel from here to there, from them to me. But I do tend to have a thing for polemics. Since polemics only work in a very limited space and time, they can shed light on those limits. He, who delivered a great translation of an email sent from an art magazine to her using polemics as a tool, he agrees with her – the two write with so much

Where is this place? Where is this city, His City?

...I don't know what it might have been like in the early 90s, when there was widespread state brutality in Kashmir, for this old man to sit here in his shop.

Hansa Thapliyal

I got involved in somebody else's practice of relation. I was mesmerised by somebody else's strategy to try and take appropriate account of a context overwhelmed with daily violence and the instrumentalisation of the politics of fear.

Which place do you go if to be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, and thus to rely on the nation-state for protection from violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another? (Butler, 2009: 26)

From Iran to Kashmir – another casualty in the stream of global unrest? Or invisibilities of different kinds? Who speaks what from there, and how do I listen?

In one documentary account, I see people running, running for their lives.

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**All writings in italics are quotes, from written texts and videos circulating on the Internet as well as personal communication and email*

poignancy, it should make tears well up in your eyes (laughter and pathos both) – that urgency, involvement, makes the art magazine’s request to her unbearable (I will tell you about it in a moment).

He, she, others writing from and to Iran, involved, glued to the Internet for hours, for good reasons – the Internet linked closely to all those microdissidences – organised a talk/screening/discussion later that year in Berlin. They decided to show a video that used much of the material that the *citizen journalists*, as she calls the bloggers, spread, but to not show the material itself, unmediated – for example, one of the beautiful and strong Rooftop poems, “Where Is This Place?” (see below). It would have made them cry, she says, and it would have silenced those attending, both because they do not feel the same, quite likely, they come from a distance, but they would also, quite likely, have been completely incapable of handling the emotions.

Some Questions

Whose involvement is sincere, who appropriates? When is it actually involvement, and when should one rather remain quiet? How do we negotiate the borders of the national, what are the outlines of an internationalism (today?), how do we negotiate our location and where we speak from, and how do we link that to where others speak from, or other locations and their politics? Where am I political and where appropriating?

If one central entry node for accountability, for entering the sphere of recognition, is the acknowledgment of the right to fear, the question can also be asked like this: *how do we, as any spectator suppos-*

The mainstream media reporter is usually shown as standing heroically in the midst of situations like this, fearless, to bring us the immediacy and the news. Where do I stand when I look? When I watch the news, when I watch a documentary introducing people running, scared faces – a sign of uttermost precarity. And, where do I stand when I attempt to follow the choices of the Kashmiri photographer, Syed Muzafar, for framing daily experiences in Srinagar, and the choices of Hansa Thapliyal to work with his images, initially shot for the daily Urdu newspaper *Afaq* for her installation *His City?*¹

Yellow and blue trees are not a metaphor here either but a strategy to engage. Something is returned which was destroyed or faded from within the image frame. Something is added through a craft, like a gift.

Art Spaces

The installation: walls made of cotton fabric and light metal pipes create a small space within the larger exhibition building, the fabric hanging in a manner that reminded me of clothes drying racks. Longish pieces of textile in different light colours and variant width with black-and-white photographs printed on the mostly coarse cotton material. The images spread unevenly over the textile panels. Looking at the stills I took of the installation, I at times wonder whether they appear like flags – but whom, which place or what sentiment, do they represent, celebrate or commemorate? There were certainly no symbols, icons or stripes.

No written text accompanied the images, but different narratives unfolded when I attended to the varied arrangements of the images. Images of movement, traffic,

edly not involved in or merely not injured by a suffering he or she looks at, apprehend the other's suffering – and fear? This was the question we started off with.

Now I would like to add: how do I not only apprehend; how, where and in what form do I get involved? What and where is the place of the political, my politics, my place of politics?

Let me get to this specific place, to the writings from/on Iran, to her writing, his translation, the art magazine.

Blogging is an alternative sphere of communication. It is a place for the other voice, in many ways taking over what could be considered the tasks of journalism and its media, but also immediate or, to use another word (and not use 'authentic' or 'real'... too troublesome), direct. In Iran, following the election fraud in June 2009, blogs have been a source of communication for the protests, both for the protestors themselves but also to let the world out there know what is happening, since the regular media channels are all censored and/or controlled, and journalists are either in jail or no longer in the country. Many blogs provide detailed information on the protests, what happens where, giving translations of the speeches of the Iranian 'government', as well as interpretations of actions and tactics. They also collect and list the names of those who are imprisoned and publish accounts of torture. They write, as does she, who is gifted with the talent for the right words and the right questions, as *citizen journalists*. The writing is part of the protest, not only its mirror: *they are making use of everything they have at hand and turning it into a powerful tool in the cause. From slogans from the Revolu-*

urban activity, of crowds of people gathering, sitting or standing in public spaces, listening to a speech, of houses and roads affected by explosions or fire, of soldiers, people parading in front of army tanks, people pointing.

Some prints had small additions through embroidery, crafted with light-coloured thread, subtle but clear: the outline of a house half in ruins or of a door sill, a sparrow next to a shrine, the contours of a child's head, maybe bandaged, a blue and a yellow tree growing from behind a house, the facial outline of a baby on the lap of a woman who might be its mother, a fish in a bag carried over a bridge, two forearms and hands, one gripping the shirt of a man and pulling it over his head, the other hand reaching towards the shoulder of what could possibly be another soldier. Both hands were also extracted from the image where they appeared first. Seeing them separate, the human physique traced and sketched with a pencil, one becoming a fist, the other attaining a gesture of care, or maybe merely lifted to reach out, both attain a sense of fragility common to any human body lacking a nurturing context.

To be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology.
(Butler, 2009: 3)

There was also the portrait of a man, reappearing twice in the installation. Once next to a group of women, possibly protesting; once printed on a small piece of cloth like a handkerchief, with flowers embroidered next to the still of the face. A reference to

tion that they subvert and poetically appropriate and set free of a fixed meaning to consumer technology that they use to communicate directly and unhierarchically to the world about their situation as citizen journalists, changing the landscape of journalism forever.

Hamid Dabashi, in his angry response in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* (Issue 956, pp. 16-22, July 2009) to Slavoj Žižek's "Berlusconi in Tehran" text, published in *The London Review of Books* (Vol. 31, No. 14, 23 July 2009), writes that *for people like Žižek, social upheavals in what they call the Third World are a matter of theoretical entertainment*. He wants him to shut up and learn first. He also criticises the writer of the *Angry Arab* website, Asad Abu Khalil, for ignoring the voices of the protest and only focusing on the official media (CNN, who also know shit, or who rather prefer to know nothing). *We need to bypass intellectual couch potatoes and catch up with our people. Millions of people, young and old, lower and middle class, men and women, have poured in their masses of millions into the streets, launched their Intifada, demanding their constitutional rights and civil liberties. Who are these people? What language do they speak, what songs do they sing, what slogans do they chant, to what music do they sing and dance, what sacrifices have they made, what dungeons have they crowded, what epic poetry are they citing, what philosophers, theologians, jurists, poets, novelists, singers, song writers, musicians, bloggers soar in their souls, and for what ideals have their hearts and minds ached for generations and centuries?*

[W]bloggers who soar in the souls of 'these people', Dabashi writes – immediacy,

photographs which families keep for many years of the ones who disappeared and might already be dead but are still waited for. This gesture seemed special, to me less for the personification or personalisation of the conflict through a face but by being a respectful act of repetition of a practice of mourning.

Those documents – of which some had appeared once in an Urdu Kashmiri newspaper, others might have never been utilised to report and all of which were eventually stored in a plastic bag in Syed Muzafar's office, initially with no further intention to use them – were thus displaced, taken out of their production context, given another life.²

My response to seeing them in *His City* was affective, I would even say emotional on a certain level. I felt deeply moved and went back several times to look at them. I felt addressed, and now I am wondering about those sentiments. We often talk about closure through emotion, about art appropriating politics for a nice digestible story. Did the installation create a comfort zone for me, a soft encounter with a conflict zone? Allowing me a bit of participation by deciphering the images? Or, what can be thought and done with an affective response to all the possible stories a document might entail?

Working in Srinagar, I found a place of rest, and a place to learn something about colour. Hansa joined a former government worker who had left his government job during the early 90s to run a small tailoring shop in Srinagar where he embroiders – he makes a step aside. Learning his craft of embroidery becomes, as I understood, another side-stepping,

the other voice: the people, actually *these people*, as he puts it: he wants it to be specific, the knowledge, and thus those who speak.

She, who writes from Tehran about the various forms the protest takes, the nightly soundscapes, the daily demonstrations, the gatherings, the street fights, the communication which finds all kinds of channels even when phone calls, cell phones and email are no option, the camouflage, the struggle with fear, the fearlessness of the struggle, she then got an email, from this art magazine which sits elsewhere (sits: thinks, operates, markets, works, acts), they loved the melon juice, it became a metaphor for why they publish an art magazine at all. Their email was baffling. He, who is witty and fearless too, rewrote that email, no, he translated it. They write, he writes, this: *We really want to exploit the work that you are still in a process of understanding which you happened to have 'produced' in Iran (I suppose I'm being too 'productivist' in my understanding of your activities as an 'artist', no?)... We have a few design obstructions because actually we think your blog would be more interesting if it becomes more catchy-to-the-eye... you have to understand most of our 'readers' just skim through the mag, so we have to make it visually appealing. Therefore we would like to disregard the content and focus on the form. But it's up to you in the end, your experiences are important, and I think it's great how you only talk about your direct experiences (vocab of the day, dramatically omit – as if it's possible to include anything else in such a moment). But do you actually believe in 'authentic experience'? Isn't that also a bit outdated*

now by the filmmaker/artist/storyteller feeling paralysed before starting her work towards a collaborative documentary film project which asked for moving from encounters with images to encounters with people.³ How to address one's fear of not being equipped to address people with experience of daily violence, of not knowing how to approach the situation and how to speak of it? And – how to not be affected by the pervading atmosphere of fear, paranoia and suspicion, or move and think along its parameters?

Crossing the bridge daily and looking at the city from the tailor's shop became a momentary interruption of seeking access through talking, understanding through gathering information, opinions and narrated experiences, a stepping outside of a zone of paranoia. Precisely this suspension and interruption of the given 'logic of the action', in terms of the politics of the place and in terms of producing a response to a place of conflict, provided the knowledge of a craft that was later translated into a gift towards Muzafar's images, and which I experienced as yet another gift, another invitation to look at images from Kashmir and what they might tell. The conversation between the photographs, the cloth and the carefully chosen parts drawn out or imaginary details added through thread seemed to act like folds, layers of stories and relations.

What can be produced if nothing is assumed yet? Where is the place of the political if no definite language is forthcoming yet? The blogs on Iran also allowed me to follow somebody searching for a language to think and tell what he/she experienced.

these days? You tell me – what was the real political potential of the event (I need some conversation material, please)?

For some, blogging is the voice of the people; for some, it provides metaphors for art – ice-cream and melon juice as edible, consumable metaphors.

Dabashi bashed Žižek because, he says, he writes when he knows nothing. Is he right about that? How political can you be, if you consider your voice to be only ‘specific’? Should you wait, no, learn for years before you raise your voice, or, rather, your published voice? Or is Dabashi’s argument not also one about the capitalising on politics, on atrocities, on fear, on resistance, within the spheres of art, academia, critique, theory, thinking, which get paid for? This is, of course, always linked to the question of who gets heard, who surfaces within the sphere of recognition (‘recognition’ being another word for the geopolitical design of ‘the world’).

What an amazing people, *these people* – yes, Dabashi is right here in this wording, *these people*, he writes. We have to acknowledge the specific time and place of a struggle, account for those who stand up against the violence, who raise their voices against the call of fear. *The emphatic unity of the people, their creative self-organisation and improvised forms of protest, the unique mixture of spontaneity and discipline*, Žižek writes. They are fearless also because they are capable of a collective empathy – what happens to one of us happens to all of us – shaping an incredible and insistently continuing protest, from which, indeed, we need to learn.

More Questions

Whose task is it to make things heard?

Hansa shares a conversation with Syed Muzafar where he tells her that after some time he started getting his adrenaline going when taking images of violence, of wounded bodies, and that a new fear towards images of beauty developed for him. The thrill and yet routine of capturing particular signs of what makes a place a conflict zone is a recurring theme, a distancing device for the maker and the viewer of those images. Every documentary filmmaker knows it’s often very easy to make images of the horrific – and consequently knows about the exploitation that is entailed hereby and by the casting of people and places as victims and subjecting them to being looked at. At the same time, the divide that happens between the onlooker, seemingly safe, and a place or a people suffering might cause distress in the viewer because the act of looking is painful for myself while I look. Do I critique those images also because I don’t want to feel that pain and the fear of experiencing it? Or is it actually harder to relate otherwise?

Looking for a Language of Empathy

What I most strongly experienced in *His City* was permeability. A permeability of sincere attempts to relate, of ways of looking at a daily context that is saturated with violence, which is self-evidently there as a constant layer of daily experiences, and at photographs taken of this context and transported to Mumbai, and thus a collaboration of practices and responses to Kashmir. There were fragilities that I sensed in the nevertheless decisive choices of photographic framing and in choices to carefully work upon partly faded and torn photographs through cloth and embroidery. Being sus-

(Of course, always also linked to the fundamentals: who speaks, who listens?). Can Žižek only write, as Dabashi states, entirely impressionistically? Where is this place called 'involvement'? When does an account of something get accounted for, and when does it become regarded as mere 'form'? What if art hijacks politics? What if politics become the mere input for the acquisition of cultural capital?

Sources

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/956/op5.htm> (accessed 15 November 2009).

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n14/slavoj-zizek/berlusconi-in-tehran> (accessed 15 November 2009).

<https://un.poirron.org/~tasche/> (accessed 15 November 2009).

<http://www.sidewalklyrics.com/> (accessed 15 November 2009).

<http://iranfacts.blogspot.com/> (accessed 15 November 2009).

<http://www.mightierthan.com/2009/07/rooftop> (accessed 15 November 2009).

pended and experiencing those choices felt precious and put me in a particular place from where I now look at the many other accounts of Kashmir.

I wonder – can artistic and poetic strategies be in dialogue with a theoretical proposal of *a politics toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange* so as to *understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing a certain population, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence?* (Butler, 2009: 28)

References

Budak, Adam, Anselm Franke, Hila Peleg, Raqs Media Collective. *Manifesta 7: Index* (Silvana Editore, 2008, Milan).

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (Verso, 2009, London/ New York).

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Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: "Where Is This Place?"

Friday the 19th of June 2009 / Tomorrow, Saturday / Tomorrow is a day of destiny
 Tonight, the cries of Allah-o Akbar are heard louder and louder than the nights before
 Where is this place? / Where is this place where every door is closed?
 Where is this place where people are simply calling God?
 Where is this place where the sound of Allah-o Akbar gets louder and louder?
 I wait every night to see if the sounds will get louder and whether the number increases
 It shakes me / I wonder if God is shaken
 Where is this place where so many innocent people are entrapped?
 Where is this place where no one comes to our aid?
 Where is this place where only with our silence are we sending our voices to the world?
 Where is this place where the young shed blood and then people go and pray?
 Standing on that same blood and pray
 Where is this place where the citizens are called vagrants?
 Where is this place? You want me to tell you?
 This place is Iran.
 The home place of you and me.
 This place is Iran.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKUZuv6_bus&feature=player_embedded

Notes

1. The multi-media installation, *His City*, was commissioned by Raqs Media Collective for 'The Rest of Now', the exhibition they curated for *The European Biennial Manifesta 7*. Direct quotations from Hansa Thapliyal can be found in Adam Budak, Anselm Franke, Hila Peleg, Raqs Media Collective, *Manifesta 7: Index* (Silvana Editoriale, 2008, Milan), p.105.
2. The images are now also part of *Godaam: The Digital Image Archive*, kept at Majlis (a "centre for rights discourse and inter-disciplinary arts initiatives"). They were initially collected by Hansa Thapliyal and made accessible through Majlis. The politics of working with an archive of that kind, for cultural and pedagogical purposes, was discussed at a workshop held in Pondichery in February 2008; cf. http://www.majlisbombay.org/godaam_kashmir.htm (accessed 15 November 2009).
3. *Yi As Akh Padshah Bai* (*There Was a Queen...*, 2007), dirs. Kavita Pai and Hansa Thapliyal.

