

TEHRAN 2010: IRAN INCORPORATED?

There is no point in denying it: since 2005-2006, artists from Iran are engulfing the international art world. Here I am not referring to the Iranian artists participating in group exhibitions all over the world, but especially to the literally hundreds of exhibitions and publications, dealing exclusively with: 'Art from Iran, the Middle East, Iranian contemporary art', etc.



FOTOUHI LASHING OUT AT BAKSHI, AZAD ART GALLERY, TEHRAN

The list is simply too long to even contemplate reprinting it here, so instead I would mention a number of recent publications some how related to these issues: the glossy Thames & Hudson book entitled: 'Different Sames, New perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art' (2009), the special edition of the French art magazine Art Press: 'L'Iran dévoilé par ses artistes' (Iran unveiled, 2010), and in Tehran itself, we welcome the first edition of the much anticipated 'Art Tomorrow' (2010) magazine.

DIASPORA

Since 2005, substantial exhibitions with artists either living in Iran or belonging to the so-called diaspora, are held in nearly every major European and American city, and here we do not mention future Iranian mega-projects in other parts of the world. Many of these exhibitions seem to advocate forms of a 'national, identity based

Iranian nature', and they are either set up by, or are at least co-produced with, organisations, based in the Gulf and in Western countries. Institutions which are run mainly by Iranian nationals firmly embedded within the large Iranian diasporic community.

The crucial role in this artistic proliferation played by, for example, the Dubai Art Fair, the Sjarjah Biennial and different protagonists on the London art scene, is obvious. This influence of individuals and institutions from outside upon the Iranian artistic scene proves to be a central topic in the current debate. Here I would like to paraphrase art critic and curator Vali Mahlouji: "The Iranian condition is profoundly diasporic, even the art produced inside Iran is aimed at the outer world." The disinterest, even aversion of the current political leaders for contemporary art, a situation emanating from the distant 1979 Islamic Revolution, led, amongst others, to a severance from its important modernist past, and to the recent reaction of the local art scene strongly focussing on the outside.⁽¹⁾ So, for many internal artistic agents, the looking beyond the national borders, seemed the only viable direction. Or is it?

We hint here at a culture of absence, of self-censorship, and in the last decade also, to the more or less critical embracement of consumerism with flavours of neo-orientalist kitsch, by several artists. For some local voices the present 'over-emphasis' on a culture of leisure, on forms of 'acting out and presentation', is a reaction against decades of religious and nationalistic rhetoric. Here thrives a fragmented society which was crushed by heavy ideological symbolism, and it craves for something

else. For others, it proves the difficulty, the impossibility to deal with the existing void, the ongoing cultural damage at the heart of the Iranian condition, leading to forms of diasporic, often superficial, escapism. And this within an international frame work. Here above all: 'not-being' is the key word. I would combine these conscious forms of forgetfulness with another aspect of historical amnesia: the recent Iranian boom dating from 2005, is not a new phenomenon, but is rooted in an, often forgotten, own artistic past. Iran can look back upon a very rich history of contemporary art, which developed, due to the long political isolation of the country, a specific character.⁽²⁾

FIGHT CLUB

So, what about the situation in Tehran? The capital city boasts more than sixty galleries, a network of vivid collectors, a very limited number of independent initiatives, and the mythical Museum of Contemporary art, conceived in the sixties and opened in the late seventies of the previous century. And above all, we witness thousands of vibrant artists. Time to return again to the Iranian capital and feel its pulse. "The first rule about fight club is, you don't talk about fight club."⁽³⁾

My first stop in Tehran brought me to the collaborative project 'Employment' by two of Iran's internationally well known artists: Mahmoud Bakshhi and Shahab Fotouhi, which opened on the 27th of august at Azad Art Gallery. For Azad they developed a range of joint performances where one of the two artists invited the other one to participate in a 'secret' performative act: i.e. the invitee remained largely unaware of the content of the performance, con-

cocted by his counterpart. This twist explained the subtitle of the exhibition: 'this is not a collaborative act', an element of surprise was inherent to the project. On Friday the 27th of august, the who's/who of the national and international Iranian art world assembled for this performance, filling the gallery floor completely. Meandering in the middle of the crowd, Fotouhi was obviously searching for his artistic brother in arms. And then suddenly the whole thing escalated: Fotouhi viciously attacked Bakshhi, combining heavy punches with forms of wrestling... Tearing their clothes apart, the two artists were throwing each other against the gallery wall and the surrounding public. Some of the punches missed target, but landed on the spectators.

This aggressive/performance' brought memories of Chuck Palahniuk's explosive novel 'Fight Club' to my mind. But where Palahniuk was hinting at the despair of a mainly white, American, male working class population, Fotouhi and Bakshhi seemed to refer to recent political events in Iran, and more specifically to the dramatic elections held in 2009. The 3rd performance in their Employment cycle confirmed my presumption: they were reanacting the infamous television debate between president Ahmadinejad and his contender Moussavi held last year.

Concluding: does hopelessness finally results in the hitting of one another, in the end, even of one-self? Or was this another example of the aesthetic exhaustion, even the shallowness of part of the art scene, keen on superficial effects?

CONSUMERISM

My second halt was at the impressive Aun gallery, where Elmira Roozbeh presented her 'Showcase' project. She depicts a number of glossy works, densely populated by toys, teddy bears and Santa Clause figures. Her highly skilled rendering of the toys, augments the feeling of unease and obsession. In this respect Roozbeh's work reminded me of similar works I saw in the past years in Iran, where items of consumerism are endlessly repeated in a hyper-realistic style. Here I doubt the critical potentiality of this

strangeness preceded by familiarity. Soth choose to involve his daughter, Carmen, to accompany him through the streets of Brighton Hove, capturing daily details. Gill excavates like an archaeologist the memory of the city via used objects and found material – such as false eyelashes, fish tails, juxtaposing them onto the images of Brighton. Kawachi is carried away by the scenery of birds accumulating in the sky-scape, flocking in sunset, imagining tales taking place above the ground. Kawachi also presents a gathering of photographs akin to her known practice, taken in the common places.

COMMERCIAL TAXI

An old Co-op Department store hosts 'New Ways of Looking', displaying various photographic practices. Viviane Sassen's two series 'Flamboya' and 'Moshi' bring a fresh breath to portraiture and photographic composition. Suzanne Opton participates with two series: 'Soldiers' and 'Many Wars', for which she chose to work with soldiers who have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Oscar Fernando Gomez has been documenting the city-scape of Mexico through his window of the world: the commercial taxi he drives. Wout Berger depicts contaminated nature resources as the source of his imagery, whereas Mohamed Bourouissa focuses on the periphery of Paris. Billy Monk's portraits of night clubbers solemnly communicate with the community texture depicted by Oumar Ly. Lastly Dhruv Malhotra brings together (un)usual locations to finding a place to sleep outdoors in India. Sady, Ju Duoqi's 'Museum of Vegetables' does not go beyond mere re-compositions of milestone images

phers: from established ones to young names, from North to South America, the Far East to South Africa. The Brighton Museum & Art Gallery hosts 'Strange and Familiar: three views of Brighton' by Alex Soth, Stephen Gill and Rinko Kawauchi. The title reminds me of French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy's argument: life is

work as it is described in the exhibition catalogue. On the contrary, I felt that the limitless duplication of consumer goods stresses the commodification of everyday life, and affects the art works in their ontological dimension, neutralizing their critical dimension.

The bustling Ettemad gallery presented a typical group painting exhibition, bringing different tendencies of the current Tehran art scene, objet related, accessible...

Lastly I had the chance to witness meetings and workshops held at the independent Parkingallery, led by media artist and curator Amirali Ghasemi. He is preparing several projects both in Iran and abroad, where elements of the performativity inherent to the condition in Iran and the enactment of artistry, combined with its strong ties with the outside world, are analyzed and played out. Central in his curatorial endeavour is the strong historical contextualization of these projects. The first leg of his project Iran&cie will be held in Bruges on the 24th of October 2010.

Ghasemi is one of the rare Iranian artists and curators who summarizes the multi-layered and complex condition of his country in challenging art projects, far removed from the pressures of the local and international art market, or the stardom of the art world.

Michel DEWILDE

September 2010, Tehran.

¹ I refer here to the artists linked to the Saqqakhanesh movement (1962), and more 'independent' artists like Monir Farmafarman or Mohammed Ehsai, or the Iranian filmscene in 1950's-60's.

² Here I think of the many photographers, visual artists and film directors active since the early eighties both inside Iran and in the diaspora.

³ Palahniuk, Chuck, Fight Club, p.48, 1996

'Employment', Shahab Fotouhi & Mahmoud Bakshhi, Azad Gallery.

'Showcase', Elmira Roozbeh, Aun Gallery.

'Group painting exhibition', Mohsen Ahmadvand, Reza Panahi, Mohammad Khoodashenas, Shantia Zakarneh, Ettemad Gallery.

'Belgium Inc', Pieter Geenen, Kelly Schaech, Jasper Rigole, Bram De Jonghe, Nel Aerts, Daniël Dewaelle en Rozemarijn Spillaert, Mohsen Gallery.

'Iran&cie', different artists by Amirali Ghasemi, Parking Gallery.

'Art tomorrow', launch of the new magazine of contemporary art.

On the 24th of October 2010 independent curator Amirali Ghasemi opens his exhibition: 'Iran&cie in Bruges', the first stage of this travelling project. www.echhorizon.be, www.parkingallery.com

Riedl) as well as individual practices (Lee To Sang – baby portraits). The intention is valuable, though the result sometimes merges decoration.

Besides the conceptual approach and the exhibition of photographic works, the biennial wants to trigger a discussion around exhibiting photography free of frame. Announcing itself as a first, the exhibited works appear in three sizes printed by – and sponsored by HP, digital printers. This choice is provocative and challenging. Some of the selected works however demand analogue printing; some need their own size or stable frame. Thus, the idea is again better than the experience itself.

Additional to the opening weekend talks, the Biennial also hosts a publishers hub, bringing together various publishers and bookshops from all around Europe, mostly England and Ireland, to display their collection. The magazines at the hub were also the media partners – Photoworks dedicated a whole issue to the biennial. Publishing houses such as Steidl sold artist books by the exhibiting artists and the curator. Blurb published the biennial catalogue as print on demand – another innovation, which keeps the budgets at bay for publishing for large-scale exhibitions. Blurb has printed 1,2 million books in 2009 with a 4,5 million profit.

Fatos USTEK is an independent art critic & curator and editor of Nowiswera.

'New Documents', The 4th Brighton Photo Biennial 02.10 – 14.11.2010. http://www.bpb.org.uk/Brighton Photo Biennial Catalogue with introduction by Helen Cadwalller and contributions by Martin Parr, Jamie Wyll, Jonathan Swain, Juliette Buss. Blurb, 120 pages, in color, 25,- ISBN 9781908796443.

University of Brighton hosts 'A Night in Argentina', showcasing distinct photography works. 'The High Tide' is an irregular documentation of communities residing in the Parana River Delta. Alejandro Chaskielberg's photography revolves around duration. He plays in the twilight zone of light and darkness, introducing light sources additional to full moon and long-takes. Expanding visuality and perception, the images are an encapsulation of traces of movement and accumulated light. Esteban Pastorino Diaz has been documenting the architectural output of Francisco Salomone, who has extensively built slaughterhouses and cemeteries in provincial towns in 30s and 40s of Argentina. The architecture, unique in its aesthetics and expression, is shown in night-time-long-exposures, monumental like their subject. Fabrica hosts 'the House of Vernacular': mostly images from archives (Archive of Modern Conflict – fancy aeroplane interiors of 60's and 70's African dictators, man wearing hats in Bogota and British Litter bins from the University of Brighton Design Archives), private collections (Titus

ABC Art Belge Contemporain au Fresnoy à Tourcoing

UNE BELLE BROCHETTE D'EMPÊCHEURS DE TOURNER ET DE PENSER EN ROND.

A quelques encablures de nos frontières, Dominique Païni livre sa vision de l'art contemporain en Belgique. Si l'effacement semble un être l'un des nombreux fils conducteurs à la réflexion qu'il mène, l'ensemble, sensible et singulier, ne s'effacera pas de si tôt de nos mémoires.

Jean-Michel BOTQUIN

En lisant l'édition de cette livraison d'Art Presse consacré à l'art en Belgique qui accompagne l'exposition dont il sera question ici, j'ai à la fois pensé, Dieu sait pourquoi, au politicien socialiste flamand, mélomane et chef d'orchestre à ses heures, Willy Claes, et au poète surréaliste wallon Achille Chavée. Sans doute parce que Catherine Millet fait référence dans cet édito à une ancienne livraison d'Art Presse consacrée à l'art des Inuits, ces amérindiens du grand Nord. Association d'idées, ceci me rappelle que durant les années 80, démantelant une crise politique comme seule la Belgique peut en inventer, Willy Claes aimait à évoquer face caméra sa «prudence de sioux», prononçant distinctement et plusieurs fois le X final de sioux, avec un très inconscient sens aigu du burlesque. Achille Chavée eut, lui, cette célèbre répartie, qui résume à elle seule bien des choses quand on évoque l'art en Belgique : «je suis un vieux peau-rouge qui ne marchera jamais dans une file indienne».

'Les Belges' après les Inuits, l'idée ne peut que nous plaire; et nous inviter, dès lors, à poursuivre sur le même sentier: quels drôles d'apaches septentrionaux Dominique Païni a-t-il croisé ? Quels artistes emplumés fumant l'image d'un calumet et non l'objet, a-t-il donc rencontré en préparant cet 'ABC Art belge contemporain' qu'accueille cet automne le Studio National des Arts contemporains du Fresnoy à Tourcoing.

CASCADES

Il y a tout juste vingt ans, Suzanne Pagé organisait au musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris 'L'art en Belgique. Flandre et Wallonie au XXe siècle. Un point de vue'. Suzanne Pagé s'était largement appuyée sur l'histoire et ses filiations, tout en pliant, quelque peu, sous les pressions de l'officialité du moment. Deux décennies plus tard, Dominique Païni choisit de travailler de façon singulière, en cascades de rencontres, «une plongée en apnée amoureuse», dit-il. Le point de vue sera dès lors très différent. Son parti

pris est quasi cinématographique, en plans séquences. D'abord parce que les disciplines enseignées au Studio national du Fresnoy, photographie, vidéo, cinéma, installations, performance et chorégraphie, ont constitué un critère prioritaire de sélection. Ensuite, parce que, directeur honoraire de la Cinémathèque française, l'image cinématographique est bien sûr l'un de ses champs d'action privilégié, ce qui parfois suscite chez lui des fulgurances telle cette comparaison entre les 'Painting Painting' de Stephan Balleux et les avatars de James Cameron. Enfin, et surtout dirais-je, parce que «e sont les domaines où précisément la Belgique s'est récemment distinguée, écrit-il, puisant au sein d'un héritage marqué par le cinéma documentaire consacré aux autres arts (dont l'œuvre de Jef Cornelis continue d'entretenir l'héritage), par le cinéma expérimental (son festival légendaire de Knokke le Zoute), par une tradition anarcho-dadaïste spécifique et enfin tout simplement, par la poésie des attitudes 'hors limites' qui ont donné lieu de par le passé à de spectaculaires provocations ».

Dominique Païni met ainsi le doigt sur cette transversalité chez nous depuis longtemps cultivée, les œuvres de Marcel Broodthaers ne le démentiront pas. Emilio Lopez, travesti en James Ensor, sous le chapeau fleuri de 1883, assure le 'département publicité' de l'exposition. Ce serait là comme une – inévitable – première figure tutélaire. Au-delà, Dominique Païni a choisi d'investir cette singulière coexistence d'un art de l'objet et d'un art spéculatif et théorique. «L'exposition, déclare-t-il, fait l'hypothèse que la Belgique est probablement le rare pays au sein duquel cohabitent en s'influençant mutuellement, deux tendances généralement tenues comme contradictoires dans l'art après 1945: un courant conceptuel et minimaliste, et un courant post-dadaïste parfois potache, au risque de l'idiotie burlesque ».

Dominique Païni aborde ainsi de façon très actuelle, contemporaine, la vision moderne d'une qualité souvent commentée, qui ne se calcule pas forcément



EMILIO LOPEZ MENCHERO, 'TRYING TO BE ENSOR', PHOTOGRAPHIE COULEURS MAROUPLÉE SUR ALUMINIUM, 2010

Linattendu et l'indépendance d'esprit ont visiblement conduit les pas du commissaire. Il y a en effet des artistes très attendus qui n'y sont pas, comme des artistes qui ont trop attendu pour bénéficier d'une visibilité internationale pourtant pleinement justifiée – et je pense par exemple à Jacques Lenep et son insolite musée de l'Homme, pourtant remarqué par Harald Szeeman. Il y des artistes attendus dont l'œuvre est inattendue, telle cette 'Spinnenkoppentheater' de Jan Fabre, une œuvre datée de 1979 qui a gardé toute sa fraîcheur, ce qu'on ne peut pas dire de toutes ses productions récentes. D'autres sont vraiment inattendus tels le duo Castronovo-Secondini, compulsifs de l'histoire du cinéma, Pol Pierart, à qui Dominique Païni offre 'la chute' de l'exposition. En fait, on assiste là à un rééquilibrage, depuis longtemps... attendu, une vision proche, sensible, réfléchie, des lectures saisissantes. Elles sont diamétralement opposées à toutes les stratégies officielles menées depuis vingt ans, au risque avéré d'ailleurs de ne pas recevoir les appuis habituels en la matière.

Construite comme un labyrinthe, l'exposition est un parcours à la rencontre d'une quarantaine de singularités mises en dialogues, balisée par quelques œuvres référentielles, les hommages de Dujourie, la pluie de Marcel Broodthaers, les canalisations souterraines de Charlier, un film de Jef Cornelis à la rencontre de Panamarenko. Dominique Païni a tant choisi les artistes que les œuvres, en quête de ce qui lui paraissait le plus

privilegié des médiocrités contemporaines. En ce sens, il paraît difficile de réduire le rayonnement de ces artistes à un périmètre aussi vil que celui d'une nation. Leurs contributions dépassent en effet toutes les frontières, nationales ou même intellectuelles, et participent d'un tout autre patrimoine: celui, universel, de la résistance à toutes les formes de bêtise». Bel hommage, l'un des textes qui accompagnent et commentent l'exposition, «c'est bien celle des 'empêcheurs de tourner et de penser en rond'. La situation marginale de cette scène lui a donné l'avantage de servir d'observatoire avancé et

ABC, Art Belge contemporain, Studio National des arts contemporains Le Fresnoy, Rue de Fresnoy 22 Tourcoing, jusqu'au 31 décembre. www.lefresnoy.net

Yona Friedman in Antwerpen

Architect, urbanist, utopisch denker en kunstenaar Yona Friedman werd geboren op 5 juni 1923 in Budapest, ontvluchtte het naziregime tijdens WOII en leefde tien jaren in Haifa, Israël. In 1957 installeerde hij zich in Parijs waar hij vandaag de dag nog woont en werkt. Hij werd beroemd in de jaren 50 en 60 voor zijn megastructuren zoals 'Ville Spatiale'. Utopische, mobiele plannen voor huisvesting in een wereld die continu in beweging is en telkens woningnood kent.

Philip Aguirre, die de vitrinalgalerie Edition-Populaire uitbaat, voerde samen met Nico Dockx intense gesprekken met Yona Friedman. Op basis daarvan werkte Friedman speciaal voor Antwerpen zijn concept 'Métropole Europe' verder uit. 'Métropole Europe' is een visionair urbanistisch plan om te vermijden dat we in Europa onleefbare megasteden zouden creëren. In eenvoudige maar poëtische tekeningen vertelt Yona Friedman zijn concepten – deze zullen op een tiental vitrines doorheen de stad worden aangebracht en blijven daar tot 11 december te zien. Opening en presentatie van de nieuwe publicatie 'Métropole Europe' gebeurt op 24 oktober om 16u in Edition-Populaire, Bloemstraat 20, Borgerhout.

www.edition-populaire.be / 0495 48 92 20



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