

STREET VIEW: Schematic thoughts on "Tehran a loud, 2011" by Anthony Graves

STREET VIEW: Schematic thoughts on Farideh Sakhaeifar's "Tehran a Loud, 2011"

A banal certitude is reinforced by the apparent photographic clarity of Google Earth "maps", which allow me as I write this to simultaneously confirm the hours of operation of a fabric shop from a street-view of the signage on its glass door. The satellite imagery of Google's maps has become, in addition to a near-public utility, a medium for many artists. Its extra-terrestrial perspective in particular introduces at once its utility in presenting relatively reliable images of built space and the dubiousness of anyone who would believe that such reliable functionality in itself confers grounds for certainty (e.g Colin Powell's infamous use of aerial photography as evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq).

Farideh's work appears to be an attempt to disidentify with the exhaustive, functional image in both its pedestrian and violent uses and to introduce another narrative into the photographic-as-map, understood as a conquest of space.

Rather than take photographs Sakhaeifar presents a particular mode of photographic visuality. At her disposal are thousands of images, freely appropriated from Google Earth, which she stitches together in a patchwork of neighborhoods, squares, and intersecting lines of roadway. It is crucial to note that she has chosen a view of her native city, Tehran, as her subject. Her irregular framing of the image concentrates attention on a specific constellation of urban landmarks: Revolutionary Street that connects Freedom Square with Revolution Square and intersects Valiasr Avenue; the affluent neighborhoods in the north where the Green Revolution arose; Tehran University; and the government buildings where the torture of pro-Green protesters were rumored to have occurred.

Sakhaeifar's construction shows us how photographic indexicality conceived of as a utility conceal a diagrammatic presentation of the political and religious coordinates of a lived relation to history through recognition of the poetic naming of space. The main axes of her image, Revolution Street and Valiasr Avenue, reveal a direct poetic relationship between the 1979 Revolution and a 12th-century Shi'ite Imam, for example.

The images are at a scale that voids it of human content; an individual would not occupy even the space of a pixel. Walter Benjamin says of another earlier urban photographer, "The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is

photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence.” I would argue that while an image alone may supply clues, it might be best not to rely upon it to give evidence. If we take the photograph as a crime scene, or a space where a crime is perpetually under construction, to what crime, or crimes, do these images provide the clues? Sakhaeifar is generous enough to leave us without an answer.

Anthony Graves 2011

Sacrosan, Solo Exhibition by Farideh Sakhaeifar at William Holman Gallery

By Setareh Shohadaei

Three terrains of intervention: face, violence, sacred (the inviolable)

Let us put the "Workers" collection aside for a moment. The thread that links all other pieces together is a direct face-off with politics: the repetition and the automatism of the state, within a bounded territory, and addressing a known population. Facing Farideh's work, we are then in a face-off with politics itself, except that in this duel, the Other is faceless. The face as we might know, has been theorized by the philosopher Immanuel Levinas as that which calls us into the ethical relation that is a non-relation. Levinas teaches us that our ethical relation to the Other through the epiphany of his or her face, is infinite and therefore not predetermined by an established arche. It is an-archic and so a non-relation. So what is a face? We might ask Levinas, to which he answers: "The face resists possession, resists my powers... [It] speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge" (TI, 198). The face of the Other is, for Levinas, the call of alterity, that of transcendence, not a transcendence that is posited against immanence, but one that in the immanence of the face, its absolute nudity and destitution, infinitely resists my desire to kill it.

In the Sacrosanct of politics proper, the face of the Other has disappeared, and with it, withers away the necessity of our ethical relation towards the Other. "Toppled" gives us the body of the dictator, Saddam's extended arm, Stalin's coat, and Ceausescu's hair due. The dictator did not need a face; he has always been the same symptom of the larger structures of power, and as such cannot afford to speak to us, beyond the power of history that is exercised upon him; or so "Toppled", the statue but also the logic of toppling reminds us.

Then there comes the erasures of "Untitled": the juxtaposition of ISIS and NASA images of explosion, which as the artist tells us, is concerned with the question of the "how" of the possibility of humanity's simultaneous and visually indistinguishable orientation towards the "unknown" (in the case of NASA), as well as humanity's "defacing of history" (ISIS). The images, are of course, either devoid of any faces or with the face turned against the spectator. The absence of the face marks the very overlap between the "unknown" and the "human race": humanity is the unknowable. The opposition between the unknowable outside and the knowable inside, between religion and science, cannot uphold itself. Minarets erect towards transcendence give way to space shuttles erect towards the cosmos, we cannot tell the difference: both are exploding. One destroys the earth, the other the heavens, and we cannot tell which does what. The "Defacing of history", the phrase with which Farideh has described the ISIS images, can no longer remain on one side of this equation. Is not every escape to the unknown, as we see in the NASA pictures, signaling humanity's turning of its back to its history? More importantly still, the equation does not even have only two sides. The artist mimics this back turning, forcing the spectator to encounter a faceless politics. A faceless because two-faced politics, that is. If NASA and ISIS are the two faces of humanity, neither one "speaks to me", neither is nude, nor destitute. Neither calls me to the infinite possibility of an ethical relation to it, at least not in this collection. The two-face bitch is defaced.

A couple of steps down the curtains fall on the stage of politics. So what if they're shower curtains, are we not all singing to ourselves behind closed doors at the end of the day? The pedal is operated by a ghost, or perhaps it is something like Walter Benjamin's Ottoman automaton that is controlled by the dwarf of theology sitting underneath the chess-table and winning every game. The Iranian case has its nuances. Theology is not the dwarf that must operate the puppet of historical materialism while remaining out of sight. Theology is the puppet, the automaton, the pedal. Underneath the stage sits the haunting ghost of a man called rational modernity which the revolution thought it had killed. The interests of power are dictated to God, who calculates with extreme precision, brownie points for every chant that you repeat. God never had many differences with the calculator to begin with.

The crowd chants, there are faces, but replicated ones. Every few men the famous loose-mouthed basiji is refound. These are not faces that “speak to me”, their mechanical repetitions in words or pictures are total and finite, not infinite. What could have been an expression of their singularity beyond limits is the traces of their writings on their signs. But the signs are blank, erased, effaced. They mirror the blank piece of glass in the shower. We cannot tell if the glass is a mirror or a window, if we are looking at the outside or the inside, the outside is the inside. And lost in this simulacrum is the face of the Other. Once again, the violence is double: in one turn, the absent face of the dictator projects itself onto the crowd rendering into annihilation, the crowd’s ability to speak before him. In its return, the artist empties the stage, its background and foreground, of any traces of faciality, any words towards which we can hold ourselves responsible.

It is a haunting aesthetics: can politics be anything but this mimetic violence?

This affirmative mimesis of violence shows itself, perhaps most prudently, in “Tehran a Loud”. The brilliant wordplay in the title signifies the permission required for the presence of bodies and faces, but also the loudness of silence, not only because much of those street marches were decidedly silent, but because the act of silencing that which already claims its own silence as its weapon, situates us in a futility, a lack of purpose, or an absence. Once mimed by the artist, whether in the carving out of the path of demonstrations, or in what resembles windows overlooking the streets, either carved out or confronted with still images of devoid of presence, we are faced with what I think is the most powerful problematic of the political: a politics beyond the simple opposition of presence and absence.

Much of Farideh’s work is playing with this possibility, inviting us to question the authoritative boundary that any discourse of power including the State, religion, or science, imposes between the real and the ideal, the sensible and the absurd, the immanent and the transcendent. It is only in this deconstructive gesture, this affirmation of both sides of the oppositions imposed upon us, that we can play against that which is Sacrosanct, that which is inviolable. What remains to be addressed in my encounter with this work, is the question of our ethical responsibility towards the Other, even if the other is my oppressor. Farideh opens her exhibition with a quote from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

“The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guideline are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.”

The play of freedom that we are facing in this exhibition, precisely through its mimesis of violence, I would argue, situates us within this very therapeutic politics of “ejecting the internalized image of the oppressor”. Our question however then becomes, how is such a void “replaced with responsibility” (I’ll leave autonomy out of this because that’s a whole other can of worms). We know that the danger of mimesis has always been (since Plato), a production of repetition without difference. If the violence of the oppressor is a defacing by which he relieves himself of his responsibility towards the other, then how do we not entrap ourselves within the exact same logic of politics? I do not have an answer to this question, but I think the difference that I have tried to sketch out here between a work like “Toppled” and one like “Tehran a Loud” might provide us with a clue. In *Toppled*, the face of the Other is erased; in *Tehran a Loud*, both me and the Other are erased. In *Toppled* it seems, we are involved in the exact same gesture as the dictator, in *Tehran a Loud*, we are involved in the exact same gesture of the dictator, yes, but we are also something more, something in excess of this erasure, which is also the absenting of the self. We too are erased along with the perpetrators and the scene of the crime altogether. The void and the silence that remains, speaks to us in its nudity and destitution of the necessity of the appearance of the face of the Other. I think this remainder, this lack and thus necessity of the ethical relation, is the most crucial gift of the work of art, within politics and indeed within art.

“You are in the War Zone.” 2016-17

By Sagi Cohen

“You Are in The War Zone” is far from being innocent. It is a trap, almost an insurgency tactic: it wields the in-betweenness of a conflict-ready, second person address, a pointed finger that oscillates ambivalently between showing and accusing. Nevertheless, this ambivalence carries a logic – cold, precise and consistent – which can be called a logic of *super-imposition*: more than mere juxtaposition, where ‘Middle-East’ meets ‘Occident,’ even more than an imposition, where the former’s suffering impinges upon the latter’s tranquil indifference. “You Are In The War Zone” is a series of photographs in which artist Farideh Sakhaeifar deliberately juxtaposes everyday life of citizens of New York with those of the people of Syria who are encountering a war zone. The hand-traced images from Aleppo, whose atrocities came to symbolize the global disaster of Syria’s civil war, add an unmistakable measure of intimacy to Sakhaeifar’s gesture, especially in an age where politics is often reduced to a single click.

This is not the first time Sakhaeifar has used super-imposition to document catastrophe. In “Clear-Hold-Build,” an image of Aleppo, taken from the weightless flight of a satellite’s super-position, is weighed down by a sheetrock tracing of an Oriental rug pattern: there, with a literally heavy hand, she impresses the accusation of a lost home, slapping this western apparatus in the face with the destruction it presides upon from a safe distance. “You Are in The War Zone” goes a step further, deeper, using super-imposition in a more intimate and invasive way by allowing ghostly images of Aleppo to occupy a New York City park. This is not the morally neutral “look, a war zone!” – affording its audience the convenient position of “viewers,” free to pity or make donations at their leisure – but an infection, a breach, a taking-hostage.

The “war zone” imputed here is neither that of New York, nor even Aleppo, but the conditions of *visibility* that (un)fold between them; a *conflictual mediation* over the possibility of being seen, or counted. *Comme à la guerre*, Sakhaeifar stages this impossible scene so as to balance an otherwise asymmetrical distribution of power between the two locales. On the one hand, her vaguely-traced Aleppo images – depicting figures in the process of evacuating corpses from the scene – aids and abets the resilient ignorance of the New York children playing in the park. On the other hand, despite their happy-go-lucky air, the park photos have the life sucked out of them precisely by this superimposed evacuation of death. They might “occupy” the context that Sakhaeifar had cut out, but are thus infected by its hopelessness and death. This logic is known in global politics, but here it is made to *speak*.

This political artist does not mind morally compromising herself and her work, even her audience, if that will get her ethical point across. Sakhaeifar’s medium of super-imposition *forces* her audience to occupy this impossible ‘war zone’, a space often occupied by a Western presence that declares itself to be moral and innocent. In her visual montage, there is only space for this presence in the absence of dead Middle-Eastern children. Sakhaeifar breeches the expectation of her own ability to speak— the easily-digestible position of the well-mannered immigrant who ‘inspires’ Western guilt. Instead, she injects the guilt, making the encounter irreversible, its impositions excessive. This work is as dirty as it is personal, pushing-back against the all-too-familiar media(tion) logic whose basic assumption is that ignorance means innocence or that indifference guarantees justice. Sakhaeifar has no patience for such luxuries of moral hygiene – and it shows.

Sagi Cohen is an Arab-Jewish expat from Israel who found refuge in Canada. His line of flight was Academic, which explains his recent completion of a PhD in Political Science. There, he tried to provide an ethically-centered methodological discourse around betrayal, where the western psyche – typically blinded by its own good intentions (or love) – can finally own up to its own sublimated, systemic hatreds; a first step towards ethical responsibility beyond the auto-sterilizing mechanisms of white guilt. Interested in the more difficult and less institutionally-controlled aspects of ethical encounters, this “Dr. Cohen” can be found loitering at the borders of various academic faculties, a nomadic parasitism which also explains his sordid affairs with political and performative art.