

"Stamping Time" by Sohrab Mahdavi

Sunday, June 11, 2017

Letters I Never Wrote is pointing at an arbitrary, parallel world existing contemporaneously with the actual one.

Possible Histories

Like in the many-worlds interpretation in quantum mechanics, where the outcome of a dice throw opens the possibility of any one of the six numbers to emerge as true, *Letters I Never Wrote* opens the possibility of an alternate reality, one in which a different history (absence) is hinted at. Commemorative stamps are meant to preserve that which has passed on by bringing it into the symbolic order. They canonize their subjects to narrate a version of reality built on seemingly solid foundations. They dress events or figures in symbolic stature to come up with referential markers.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 threw all previous historical reference points into a vortex. It was a tectonic force that - for a short while before and after it - dislodged reality previously thought to be unitary and solid. Social actors tried to establish their own reference points. This led to multiverses that giddily undermined the solid foundation of established reality. Freedom from reference points, however, is unnerving and a natural zeal for consolidation of reality seems inevitable. The advent of Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) gave substance to this fear of "thrown-ness" and led to a puritanical resolve by some of the actors of the revolution to fill the symbolic gap with new totemic representations.

The entire country became a palimpsest to bring about this massive project of relocation. As symbolic pillars of official history, much like bank notes, stamps tender reference points by which a selective historical arc is traced. Those born before the revolutionary events, like the author of these lines, are in a position to vie for the arbitrariness of referential markers. Like a proselyte, excited over the act of conversion, the post-revolutionary atmosphere was teeming with the desire to build a new utopian world in which all the best possible worlds could converge. This was the zeitgeist of the period and if the ruling class ultimately had to pick its own referential markers, it does not mean that other political forces were free from this puritanical drive. For revolutionary factions there was no time to waste. History was in need of cleansing. A better world and society was to emerge, take hold.

Letters I Never Wrote shocked me in the simplicity of its referential sub-version. Indeed, the underside of a stamp becomes a white hole from which light or matter can escape but to which nothing can enter. It is really that simple. There is no solid reference point. These commemorative stamps mint a constellation of events outside official reality that influence the way we live today. They list ulterior social and political actors, natural (de)formations, (il)legal proceedings, cultural and political episodes, heritage monuments, animal species that have come to pass and whose absence have not entered into the symbolic order and continue to live on in absence.

Where Does Memory Reside?

If the location of memory is taken to be in the brain, then, how can collective memory be possible? There is uncertainty as to the actual storage place of memories in scientific studies. This has led some researchers to claim that memory is outside the body, in a "morphic field" surrounding the individual, in pockets accessible to all (biological life).¹

Letters I Never Wrote is the morphic field of Jinoos Taghizadeh. Through these stamps, the artist is accessing memories that the official accounts chose to purge, vilify, or ignore. What she depicts is a different form of absence. If in *Rock, Paper, Scissors* (2009), exhibited on the 30th Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the artist showed us the front page of newspapers at the outset of the revolution by superimposing lenticular images or "wiggle pictures" onto the original newspaper images. Depending on the angle of the viewer, these pictures deflected a different reality. Another section of the exhibit *Rock, Paper, Scissors* showed a headshot of the artist at the age of 7 in a section usually set aside for the announcement of lost individuals; a caption declared that the person in the photograph had been lost with the revolutionary moment.

Letters I Never Wrote also points to an absence. Perhaps it was not the intention of the artist to give absence equal footing to presence. Perhaps, for her, being *has* logical priority over nothing. Perhaps she merely wanted to record and proclaim this absence as a call of conscience. Perhaps for her, too, "nothingness nothings."² Nevertheless, the very material existence of *Letters I Never Wrote*, the fact that the original issue was not only preserved in its entirety but sub-sided, confirms the being of nothingness in our lives - nothingness not as a privation of being but as a distinct and "possible" constituent of multiverses.

Commemorative stamps establish a world through their very minting, as they posit a certain event or figure as mainstay. The choice of the event or figure is entirely indexical - they were picked. They thus yield a particular account of history, a definitive way of looking at events leading up to the present. *Letters I Never Wrote*, a series in progress that the artist has been working on over many years, opens the possibility of a parallel reality.

¹ These researchers include Rupert Sheldrake whose morphogenic field theory suggest that memory is outside the geography of the cerebrum and the brain only acts as decoder of the flux of information, much like a TV set that receives and decodes signals existing outside it.

² For Jean Paul Sartre nothingness was absence and lack. A 100-dollar bill that you thought you had in your wallet (but which you cannot find) is a real instance of nothingness. Similarly, for the French philosopher, the ego (memory) is not inside the individual but "transcendent" and composed of a set of traits in the environment surrounding the individual (or being-for-itself).