

Jinoos Taghizadeh talks with Johnny Herbert about the difficult and unending work of “narrating the silences” within an atmosphere of willful and imposed forgetfulness and state propaganda, an atmosphere from which *Letters I Never Wrote*, here exhibition at Kunsthall 3.14, emerges.

Johnny: You seem to be interested in medias that have a specific kind of mobility to them; I'm thinking specifically of your interest in newspapers and, for this exhibition, *Letters I Never Wrote*, in stamps. In some parts of the world, online news feeds and emails seem to be slowly replacing these forms yet that 'replacement' marks a huge shift in what we might call social rhythm—the space and time of sociality, I you will. I don't necessarily lament this but, like you, have an interest in things like newspapers as I feel they offer some formal properties with which it's possible to take perspectives on other medias and practice other reading strategies. Could you expand your attraction to newspapers and stamps as forms?

Jinoos: I believe there is always an official macro-narrative that controls every notion or event. This macro-narrative acts selectively and represses the events that happen, especially in the area that I live! So as an artist, maybe you could say that I try to re-narrate the micro-narratives I witness. I do that by referring to the media and what they have initially recorded and presented. I set up dialogs through them, through the very spurious data they share and distribute—those official, fake patterns that are part of state propaganda are the main materials that amuse me as an artist!

Johnny: But why specifically the newspapers and stamps instead of, say, blogs or online news platforms? Is it something to do with their specific forms of distribution and the social space they operate in where you live?

Jinoos: In the series of work in which I use newspapers as materials (*Rock, Paper, scissors*), I refer directly to the history and to the documentation of that specific duration of time, the duration in which the newspaper was the only official "authentic" narrative. In that specific time the online platforms were not considered as "official" platforms or did not even exist in the country in which I live—the main difference may be the amount of propaganda in my country. Today I believe that the online platforms may help the freedom of speech and diversity of narrations. So, in the series of works referring to the comparative narrations of history, the online platforms were not the departure point. Having said that, in one of my videos (*Proliferation*) I refer to the TV and would like to work with the online platforms now as well but in a different context.

Johnny: Perhaps this is a difficult question but maybe we can think about it together: I'm interested about this notion you bring up of narrativity, particularly its relation to historiography—how histories are written. What tools do you feel need to be developed to read and attempt to bring attention to, refunction, or rewrite the micro-narratives you say you witness and how are these tools different to those needed for the official macro-narrative you mention?

Jinoos: As you note, it is difficult to answer this question. Recognizing minorities' contribution in making history is an attempt that has been initiated not so long ago by the feminists and became widespread among other minorities. It is obvious that history has been written by the powers, by the conquerors, but today in the contemporary world there is also the possibility for the minorities or the defeated ones to access the tools of recording their own history. As an artist I do not have this claim of writing or rewriting history. I can, however, say that I see the narration of a

narrative parallel to the official one as a necessity; I try to remind the audience what they have been imposed to forget and invite them to struggle with this forgetfulness.

Johnny: I think this is a really important point; forgetting and cultural amnesia (and ignorance) do seem to be particularly prevalent today. So, do you think of this global forgetfulness as being instituted by way of the “official macro-narrative” you mentioned earlier? It seems like this is similar to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the “measuring [of] silences” undertaken in grappling with an ideology that operates globally (capitalism and its *international* division of labour)—there are no perfectly silent points from which we can calibrate instruments. You say that today there is “the possibility for the minorities or the defeated ones to access the tools of recording their own history.” The difficulty is, of course, that these tools are as much tools for states as they are for peoples, but I’m more interested in hearing your perspective on this entwinement of historiography (and the apparatuses needed to sustain recording *as* historiography) and the *desire* to record. It almost seems like there is a chasm between this imposed forgetfulness you speak of and the ability and desire to record. How do you see this?

Jinoos: It seems indeed that cultural amnesia is a global phenomenon, but to speak globally about amnesia is to speak in abstractions—I am reflecting on my local situation. Perhaps my experience is shared in many other parts of the world but we can only see commonalities when these local reflections are honed and made precise without recourse to the global situation.

This willed cultural amnesia is not something solely imposed by the state: it is the area where state power and suppressed popular will overlap. Nationalism, for example, arises in this overlap. When people are repressed, one of their instruments for exercising their will is to appeal to nationalism. The state also uses such instruments to maintain its integrity and power. A consensual silence ensues: both power and popular will maintain this silence, amnesia, and perversion of history. Ideology can provide the ground in which this consensual silence is maintained in the face of tragedies and humiliations.

I think your reference to Spivak is helpful. In my experience, economic corruption and the emergence of a form of capitalism in Iran have worsened the situation for workers—unemployment is wreaking havoc. Employers and the capitalist machine use cheap Afghan labour for economic vitality. Injustices and the violence levelled at migrant labour can be seen everywhere, though this is not recorded. Then, on May 1, Workers’ Day, the state encourages unemployed workers to rage against foreign labour and perpetuate the search for racist causes in mock demonstrations. In a silent but glaring agreement, power and popular will turn a blind eye/ear to the voice and right of minority migrant workers, their shared interest gives way to the formation of a grand narrative (official or unofficial).

Johnny: This sounds terribly familiar. Concerning social stratification, if I could turn again to amnesia: Can you expand upon how you have experienced the effect the marked changes in Iranian governmental politics (e.g. before and after the 1978 Revolution) has had upon the forgetting of certain things? To what extent does this “imposed” forgetting seem to act differently upon specific social groups?

Jinoos: To me, cultural amnesia was enacted systematically, and on several fronts, before and after the revolution of 1979 through a heavily controlled and subservient press and media, on the one hand, and, in a more fundamental way, through the educational system; several generations were exposed to such subtle and gradual revision of history, and they eventually accepted the dominant narrative

unquestioningly. People may belong to different social classes and structures, but they are given the same ration of fabricated history, which they eventually come to accept as their own. It is extremely difficult to unlearn what has been learned alphabetically. Not even propaganda by state media is as effective.

Parallel to this, we have attempts by the state to keep public knowledge of its operations at a minimum. Academic knowledge is kept out of reach, book readership drops, and as such the individual's ability to come up with his/her independent historical narrative deteriorates.

I have little or no memory of life before the Revolution of 1979, but I know that since my childhood the number of public libraries have plummeted. They are almost extinct. The National Library, which is in the capital and was once at the heart of the city, is now situated inside a web of expressways and is accessible only by car. Making use of the Library for research is only possible if in possession of a student card or by presenting the proper papers. Inside, the Library is governed by a complicated bureaucratic system. Some books and magazines are unavailable to the general public. You are only allowed to check out ten books with your card or papers but even this is dependent on those books relating to the stated field of study or research on the card or papers. If you are checking out books that do not correspond with your field, you will be questioned. In other major cities, access to information is an even bigger fight.

As such, without any apparent limitations and making it only more difficult to access information on history, culture, and science, in several decades public knowledge has deteriorated to the extent that even those in academia are only equipped to deal with their own field of specialty, making it easier to fabricate and sanctify history according to a specific blueprint.

Johnny: How do you see art, and particularly your work, as operating in relation to these conditions of disciplinary tunnel vision?

Jinoos: I am in perpetual doubt when it comes to my artistic practice. I constantly ask myself: is what I do "art"? Most often, I think of my work as a picking up of pieces, as a way to speak of those things that—due to a lack of freedom, absence of a free press and better methods of historiography and recording—others have not been able to do. Art, especially the visual arts, is less supervised; as such, I have a degree of freedom, no matter how insignificant, to record what is silent, to remember, and to remind. It is what I can do and I do it.