

# Time Lapsed

Solo Exhibition by Gita Hashemi

A Space Gallery, Toronto, March 1-30, 2013

## Curatorial Concepts and Artworks

An inter/multi/trans-disciplinary exhibition, *Time Lapsed* intrinsically connects the political and the personal: It opens a vista to a tumultuous geopolitical history that is urgently present in the contemporary political dynamics but very little understood by lay audiences. At the same time, this body of work anchors history onto the *body at work* in a personal passage through time, tracing the effects of external and internal events and transitions on the individual and social body and psyche.

***Headquarters: Pathology of An Ouster*** (performance, installation, webcast) fuses embodied writing and performance. The piece is based on the 1953 coup d'état in Iran. The first operation of its kind and the model for similar interventions elsewhere, the 1953 coup is highly significant in shaping Iran's contemporary political dynamics as well as in the history of Iran-US relations. The coup aborted Iranians' movement for oil nationalization and democratic governance, undermined secularism by dividing and subsequently persecuting nationalist and leftist forces, established the Shah's quarter-of-a-century rule of terror and sowed the seeds of the 1979 Revolution with its widespread popular anti-US sentiments. The present-day tensions between the two states originate in and follow the pattern set by the coup.

In *Headquarters* I engage with this history through the now-declassified CIA report written by one of the main designers of the coup, Donald Wilber. Written in 1954, the report chronicles CIA's alliance with the British SIS in masterminding and staging of the coup. This text is important as it was written shortly after the events to provide the CIA with the outline of the operation and to draw conclusions useful for "future parallel operations." It is also one of few remaining CIA documents pertaining to the coup. Other documents including original cables between Tehran and Washington were reportedly burned by the CIA as a matter of "routine" in the 1960s. Coming to light in 2000, the Wilber narrative, in spite of its deficiencies, has gained the status of the official US account of the coup.

The installation includes the entire report rewritten by hand on paper (75' x 5' total dimensions). The writing is treated by first debossing and then revealing the text through selective application of dry media in black and red. The debossing process (a form of carving) transforms typewritten text to embodied writing, and the selective application of colours allows for de/recontextualization and re-reading of the narrative. The work's progress is blogged daily, marking it as durational and performative. Wilber's words, arising from the deep well of secrecy, unmask in new light the devastation caused by their referent events. It is the very labour of writing by hand that makes it possible to attune to the imperial language, to recognize in its "sanitized" and bureaucratic banality its hidden impulses and violent deployment, to embody and reclaim the history it has marked.

Inspired by the Iranian tradition of *naqali*, public reading/recitation of historical accounts and legends, the performance furthers the decolonizing process. Selections from eyewitness accounts and critical authoritative writing of historians (in particular the work of Ervand Abrahamian) are remixed with fragments from Wilber's text, all delivered by a diverse cast of performers whose histories are also marked by colonial interventions. Drawing on their own experiences of imperial intervention, during workshops and rehearsals the performers will take an active role in shaping the piece, and the process will be reflected in the performance and on the blog. The performance is recorded and incorporated into the installation following the opening night event.

*Ephemeral Monument* is a participatory installation, performance and single-channel video focusing on key texts from the Iranian underground literature during the 1960s and 1970s. The piece responds to the history of thought and activism that led to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and traces the revolution's aftermaths. *Ephemeral Monument* was first staged at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco in June 2008 as part of *Theory of Survival* curated by Taraneh Hemami.

In *Ephemeral Monument*, on site at the gallery for two days, I write in chalk, erase and re-write selections from some of the texts that emerged from and influenced the political, the poetic and the personal dimensions of the opposition to the Pahlavi Monarchy and the formation of emancipatory ideas, rhetoric and actions amongst two generations of students, intellectuals and activists in Iran in the years leading to the 1979 Revolution. This performance is recorded on video and installed as a single channel projection alongside the chalkboard.

Writing in chalk is a return to my first public medium as a writer, a calligrapher and an agitator; a high school student who stole rare unobserved moments to write provocative messages on her classroom's chalkboard and who took her writing to the city walls during 1978-79 protests. Through the embodied processes of writing, erasing and re-writing, my engagement in present time with these formative texts of the past is an act of remembrance and homage to the collectivity that I was a part of; and, at once, a narrative of forced and voluntary departures from that collectivity as the writing traces the impact of crossing the historical axis.

The final layer of writing that remains on the chalkboard includes names of dissidents, activists and ordinary people who have been killed in Iran since 1979 in wave after wave of repression. The names are collected through a call to the diasporic Iranian community and partly written by the audience as the chalkboard is left open for the audience to interact with for the duration of the exhibition.

Revisiting the 1979 Iranian Revolution, one of the most dramatic popular uprisings of the twentieth century and a landmark in my own life, *Of Shifting Shadows* (interactive CD-R), presents four characters' journey in the non-linear terrains of memory and history through a hypermedia narrative based on personal interviews and historical archives. Widely received, highlighted and reviewed

since its release in 2000, *Of Shifting Shadows* is constructed in 48 interactive segments, layered with video, audio, animated text and graphics, including original and reconstructed archival material in English and Farsi. The overall viewing time is between 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Like a book, this piece engages the audience in a deep and intimate individual encounter. The viewer interacts with the piece through the mouse. The interactive experience has a haptic character as the interface diminishes the dominance of technology to prioritize the content.

*Of Shifting Shadows* speaks to the fragmentary effects of traumatic social events on individual subjectivities and the agency of individuals in recreating their lives. Speaking of their experiences of the Revolution and their consequent life in exile, four fictional women – Bitā, Mīna, Goli and the Author – deliver a complex narrative that unfolds in parallel visual, spoken and written texts. At one level, the work revisits the 1979 Revolution to chronicle and reflect selectively on the expressions of a politicized public.

At another level, it renders a voice for the Revolution's secular forces that were marginalized with the ascent of the Islamic Republic. It particularly highlights the struggles of women, whose voices were muted in the dominant patriarchal narration of the Revolution and who were the first demographic group targeted by the post-revolutionary state. The characters's narration does not suffice with the past as their path inevitably passes through their exiled present. Juxtaposing the memory of the past/there with the experience of the present/here, they weave a multi-directional critical text that allows the complexity and shifting meanings of exilic existence to emerge as it avoids sensationalism that often accompanies such work. The interactive strategy places the viewer in the position of witness and accomplice and moves the work beyond abstract, disembodied and propagandistic pondering and, thus, constructs an intimate experience and a sense of responsibility.

*Of Shifting Shadows*' beta version was exhibited at *Beyond Boundaries* at Worth Ryder Gallery (Berkeley, June 2000). It was launch at InterAccess (Toronto, Oct 2000), and, among other places, exhibited at *Maid in Cyberspace* (Montreal, Feb 2001) and *Trans/Planting* at A Space Gallery (Toronto, Jan-Feb 2001), was a highlight of the *N-Space Art Exhibition* at SIGGRAPH (Los Angeles, Aug 2001), and was subsequently included in their traveling exhibit with venues in China, India, South Africa, Indonesia, Germany, Denmark, Mexico and Japan (2002-3), was included at *InteractivA Biennial of New Art* (Merida, June 2003), in the digital art retrospective exhibit *Histoires a l'ere numerique*, in Plug-in (Basel, 2009), in the Political Is Personal (Sofia, 2011), and most recently in *Festival Electrochoc* (France, 2012). The piece received the top award in the independent disk-based category at the 2001 Baddeck International New Media Festival.

Brought together, these pieces create a rich and varied formal texture and viewing experience. *Headquarters* and *Ephemeral Monument* are spatially large and layered. Both juxtapose analog media – embossed writing on paper in the former and chalk on chalkboard in the latter – with digital video and, in the case of *Headquarters*, with webcasting. And both are highly participatory and collective in creation and dissemination. As such, they extend the space and time of the exhibition

beyond the gallery. *Of Shifting Shadows*, on the other hand, is intimate and contained in size as in viewing experience. It engages the audience at a much closer distance, and offers different forms of media, and including a rich listening experience that opens an intensely reflective space.

*Time Lapsed* steers clear from cliché and partisan interpretations and alignments in relation to Iran and its sociopolitical dynamics and history. It invites the viewers to reflect on and revise stereotypical (self)understandings of the Iranian identity and society without relying on sensationalism and voyeurism characteristic of mainstream approaches. *Headquarters* and *Ephemeral Monument* – starting long before the actual exhibition – engage many participants in processes that invite and challenge them to ponder anew their own place and relations to historical events, and to put new understandings at center stage. These peieces open multiple spaces, outside the gallery and inside, for much needed dialogues, within the Iranian community and with others, about our experiences of the past and contemporary geopolitical events. *Headquarter*'s real-time and web-streamed performance invites the audience of all backgrounds to come to a shared space and engage in a collective and collaborative reflective process, illuminating our shared humanity.

## Artist's Statement

I am deeply engaged in contemporary socio-cultural and political issues and interested in transdisciplinary approaches to art. I work with concepts, language, social relations and a variety of techniques and technologies, but most of all I work with purpose, intentions and meaning in art in a genuine search for more direct relations with the art public. For over two decades, I have been producing interactive digital media (image, sound, text) and time-based art, networked art, interventionist art, community and participatory art. For me art is a medium of communication and imagination, and its function is fundamentally about transforming my own relations to external and internal events. Through that, I hope to create a space for collective reflection, re-interpretation and transformation.

My work is guided by my reformulation of the principal feminist adage: The personal is poetic, the poetic is political, the political is personal. I am interested in the symbiotic relationships between life and art, history and individual, experiential and narrative. In *Of Shifting Shadows*, *Ephemeral Monument*, and *Headquarters*, I draw on performative and trans-media strategies to attend simultaneously to content, medium, process and material. In these pieces the materiality of writing is more than cartography and trace; videography is more than documentation; and narration is more than recounting. These performative acts add layers of interpretation and new records to the original historical body thus subverting the patriarchal and disciplinary functions of History.