# Administering Time:
## *The Owls, The Queen and The Maquettiste*

JERUSALEM AND TEHRAN

*For whatever reason, it is my past, and not my current position in life, that holds the key to my problems; I can neither escape from it nor entirely accept its mandate.*
Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar[1]

Two cities: Jerusalem and Tehran—of unique, contested and complex conditions, possessing a combination of diverse stories with fragmented, contradictory sources and narratives. Conflict, tension, antagonistic histories and geopolitical machinations constantly determine representative considerations and concepts from, and for different perspectives. Jerusalem is zone with a loaded history and, exceedingly documented, a recent colonial past and a current occupation, while Tehran, excluded from such subjugation (though occupied during both World Wars), has progressed from a provincial town to an overpopulated city with "extraordinary politics, rooted in a distinctive tension between what looks like a deep-seated 'tradition' and a wild modernity."[2]

What Jerusalem and Tehran share is an urban development axis that began around the mid-nineteenth century. The juxtapositions and clashes of modernising approaches, and the endeavour of preserving cultural inheritance can be clearly observed through architectural signifiers that were built in both cities during this period.[3] Proportionately, both Jerusalem and Tehran have been subjected to extremes of religious demonstration and regulation. As Eyal Wiezman, Professor of Spatial and Visual Culture in London has stated, "besides its complex political edges, Jerusalem is surrounded by a boundary that defines not its municipal border, but the geographical limits of one of its religions."[4] A deliberate polarization process intensifies its urban socio-spatial divisions—with the persistent continuation of religious, social and political unrest, the structure and demography of Jerusalem remains more fragmented than ever.[5]

Both cities are perceived, in the Middle East and beyond, to be hyper-politicized and principle signifiers for social, geopolitical and economic debate, and conflict. Regardless of content or intent, every element of information or communication conveyed from both locations is scrutinized through these socio-geopolitical filters, categorized through constructed narratives, denying any space, order, or intersection for new and/or other modes of reception and legacy. Consequently,

this exaggerated degree of politicization compels a premeditated expectation of art production and its reception that affects social and political rhetoric, through a desired fetishism for conflict and tension—artistic and cultural expression is obliged to present the same voice on resistance, freedom, conflict, human rights, identity politics and consensus. The criterion for processing any issue is thus decisively reduced to fulfil a demand for illustrating a political stance and/or statement, defined by a specific intellectual and elite Western perspective.

## THE ARTISTS AND THE IDEA OF COLLABORATION

> *To my mind, these men acted in response to something more important than mere belief. All three held most fervently that there should be no limit to the concept of the "possible." Everything existed within a universe in which anything could happen: objects, matter, human beings — all stood on a threshold of infinite potential, waiting for a magic word, prayer, or experiment to transform them in an instant. The flaw these men shared was to mistrust anything they could see with their own eyes or touch with their own hands.*[6]

Operating within this criterion, artists Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi-Noori have been managing endless assertive Western expectations regarding their artistic practices. Boyadgian is a Finnish-Armenian artist born and raised in Jerusalem, where he lived until 2001 before studying in Paris, Helsinki and San Francisco, receiving his MA from the ENSAPLV School of Architecture (*L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette*), specializing in urban sociology in post-conflict areas. He returned to Jerusalem in 2010 and has been working on research-based projects that explore themes engaging perception, heritage, territory, architecture and landscape. Khosravi-Noori was born in Tehran and studied film at Tarbiat Modares University, followed by studying Art in the Public Realm at Konstfack University College of Art and Design in Stcokholm. In his research-based practice, Khosravi-Noori focuses on micro-history and narrative strategy within hyper-politicized socio-political environments.

Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori met in 2015, following which they initiated an ongoing dialogue on the representation and expression of hyper-politics and aesthetics, Jerusalem and Tehran being the starting point for their research projects. The first installment of their collaboration was *Around About* (2017), a monument to the First Intifada, sited in the Felestine (Palestine) Square in Tehran, known as a location for demonstrations, before and after the Islamic Revolution. Rachel Brandenburg, who as Middle East program specialist at the United States Institute of Peace, in ascribing the Square's significance, wrote in 2010 that, "during the monarchy, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had close ties with the Iranian opposition. Many Iranian dissidents trained at PLO camps in Lebanon in the 1970s."[7] By detailing how the PLO backed the 1979 Islamic Revolution she described the significance of the square: "Days after the revolution, PLO chief Yasser Arafat led a fifty eight member delegation to Tehran. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan hosted the official welcome ceremony, where the keys to the former Israeli Embassy were handed over to the PLO. The road in front of the mission was renamed Palestine Street."[8]

By adopting ever-changing perspectives on regional politics, the *Around About* project developed a narrative drawn from this monument, presenting (devoid of any apparent motive) an upside-down map of Palestine, circumventing interrogatory by looping around places and events via the integration of historical information. The video within the work shows the camera circling

the roundabout of Felestine Square, followed by a recurring set of random images, suggesting a persistent repetition endlessly converging to the same point of departure. The monument's sculptor, Nader Qagashie and the politician Yasser Arafat, as its two 'protagonists', embody the amalgamation of politics and aesthetics, the artists' statement displayed during their exhibitions in Lund[9] and Ramallah[10] affirming; "The territorial dialogic juxtaposes micro and macro political histories of those two places in relational comparison. A third territory appears in the introduction, the museum of resistance in Mleeta, Lebanon, a counterpoint between the two geographies."[11] The work drew attention to the contradictions perceived between a territory and its image, and an event and the memory of it. Their statement further indicated the two cities mirror each other, "in a melancholic atmosphere, simultaneously crossing borders to present their similarities. An attempt to blur the borders [is] entrenched in the imaginary."[12]

    *Around About* attempted to rupture categorizations that its geographies are subject to, and by blurring their specificities, challenged normative forms of classification. The project re-conceptualized the monument by creating an additional narrative based on their research, by questioning: how do we position ourselves in the process of production in the language of art coming from politically condensed environments?

PROCESSING DISTANCE AND TIME AS AN ARTISTIC METHODOLOGY

> *I would watch in awe as the work unfolded before my very eyes: the months from both Arabic and Gregorian calendars; other divisions of time and years, from elsewhere, that were older than the seasons to which they were respectively aligned; the solar and lunar eclipses; the meticulously calculated times for morning, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening prayers; the great storms and the seasonal winds, the latter, according to his calculations, no less relevant than the former; the solstices; the days scheduled to be bitterly cold or unbearably hot.*[13]

With Jerusalem and Tehran being their individual bases, Boyadgian's and Khosravi-Noori's collaborative practice began with an inquiry into how to imagine a territory each could not engage —it is impossible for Boyadgian as a Palestinian to enter Iran with Israeli visa stamps in his passport; for Khosravi-Noori, as an Iranian artist, while it is not impossible for him to enter Israel (but very challenging to do so), it would be impossible to return to Iran with his passport stamped there. Their art work has not only defined this dilemma, but also the convergent restrictions of the conditions and accessibility to their working methodology. Distance as a concept and a tool to process their subject matter operates in two layers: (i) the physical distance between the artists (being in different countries) and (ii) the distance to the locations that they process.[14] Utilizing distance is a very distinctive researching and working methodology that enables temporary states of absence and presence. This distance expectedly requires another mode of collaboration to balance the frequency of their dialogue. It encompasses processes of deliberation, sharing, negotiation, decision-making, and ultimately working together. With their research operating through different time periods and spaces, both distant and disconnected, they also began to question the positioning of the artist as an active agency, vis-à-vis the subject of inquiry. While maintaining a critical approach to the object of inquiry, they constructed protocols determined by the conditions of their collaboration. Employing an empirical approach, the artists therefore became embedded in and responsive to this process, in respect to their personal, social and cultural contexts.
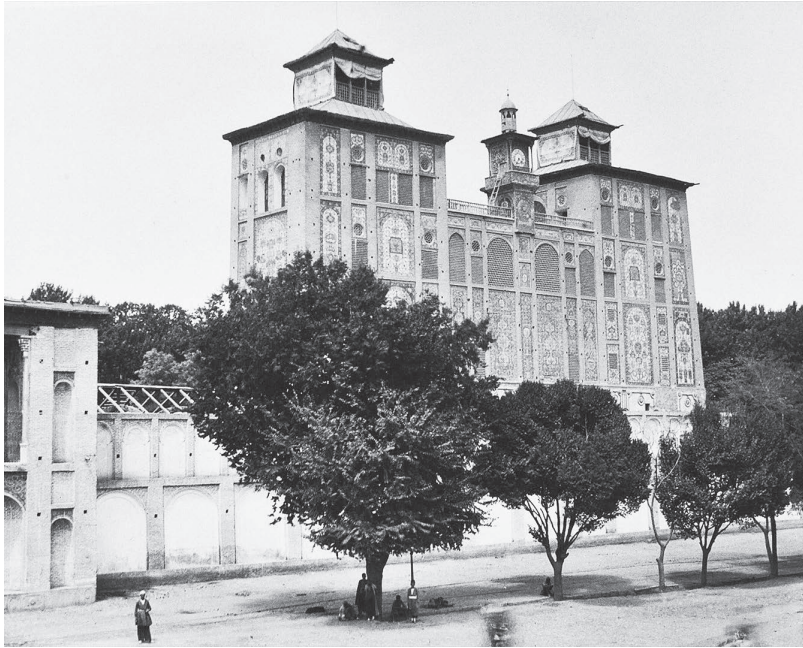
THE CROSSSECTIONS PROJECT

> *Dream after dream came to life from his brass inkpot as he sat on his low divan in the small room beside the mosque, a skullcap on his head and a reed in his hand; he would line up his calculations like little grains of rice on the scrolls propped up on his right knee, and they all swirled together in a corner of the room where the light was most dim and the sound of all the watches and clocks was most concentrated, as if waiting for their time to rule the world.*[15]

In 2017, Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori were invited individually to participate in the *CrossSections* project,[16] an interdisciplinary platform for exploration into artistic research, dialogue and production, employing an open format curatorial model, and reacting to 'process' with the intent to share and articulate diverse critical reactions and collective strategies. By placing artistic production at the centre of its research and design, the project has evolved through accumulative, interdisciplinary input by way of meetings, residencies, performative presentations and publications, over three years.

Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori decided to collaborate, given that *CrossSections* proposed the sharing of diverse conditions and strategies in different geographies, complementing their working methodologies. The structure of *CrossSections* also enabled them to develop their work based on their dialogue, by fragmenting its execution in time. With each meeting, presentation, talk and exhibition of *CrossSections*, they added, subtracted, articulated and experimented with their ideas and presentation modes, receiving feedback from the project curator, other participants, the project's network and the audiences in the three presentation cities of Vienna, Helsinki and Stockholm. For example, a silent short video work exhibited in *CrossSections_Intensities* in June 2018 transformed into a narrative-based full-length video with the *CrossSections_Intervals* exhibition in September 2018 at Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna, while a  concept notionally discussed in Helsinki in May 2018 developed as a project talk given by Khosravi-Noori also at Kunsthalle Exnergasse.

THE OWLS, THE QUEEN AND THE MAQUETTISTE

> *As important as creating a movement is maintaining its momentum. In extending our movement to the past, you have intensified its forward momentum. In addition you have shown that our forbears were both revolutionary and modern. No one can begrudge his past forever. Is history material only for critical thought?*[17]

During one of their discussions in 2017, Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori directed their attention towards landmarks in Tehran and Jerusalem infused with significant and resonating historical meaning. Realizing that the substance of their research and collaborative methodology pivoted upon the concept of time, they decided to focus on clock towers given and destroyed by the British in both cities, to allow the histories behind each to direct the pathway for their research and the development of a new collaborative work. This project presented;

> *A tale about time… [it] attempts by means of collage to narrate and fictionalize the story of three clock towers in Iran and Palestine in relation to colonial history, architecture and Middle Eastern geopolitics. A single video essay narrates a tale, a fictional dialogue between an owl and a maquettiste. The starting point of the project juxtaposes three clock towers… built between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Tehran and Jerusalem, as subjects of comparative analysis. A new territory is suggested where the clocks exist in the same time and space.*[18]

During his visit to the United Kingdom in 1873, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar of Iran was appointed by Queen Victoria a Knight of the Order of the Garter. The Queen further presented him with a large two-faced clock with the wish that the people of Tehran could 'keep time' accurately.[19] Naser al-Din ordered a clock tower to be built on the Golestan Palace (the official residence of the Qajar dynasty). According to some oral histories, the volume of the clock was so loud that it disturbed the harem, pregnant women miscarried and the frail suffered heart attacks. In response the Shah ordered the sound of the clock to be lowered by covering it in felt; but it stopped working. The clock was repaired after the Shah's assassination but broke down again in 1925. Ninety years later it was repaired once more, only to stop working again after ten months. In 1907, a fourteen metre high white limestone clock tower was built by (the 34th Sultan) Abdül Hamid II in Jerusalem. In the Ottoman Empire, from Anatolia to Damascus, sixty-three clock towers were built and this was one of the most significant examples as an imperial symbol for mastering time, and as a meeting point for Ottoman authorities to communicate with and make announcements to the local population.[20] As an indication of the Ottoman modernisation period, both Arabic and Latin numbers appeared on these clocks.[21] When the British Mandate became effective in 1923, the civilian governor, Sir Ronald Storrs, claiming to maintain Jerusalem's historical appearance had the tower demolished, supposedly being incompatible with the architectural style of the Old City Wall. Following violent public objections Storrs built a small tower with the clock in Allenby Square outside the Jaffa Gate. When there were further complaints, Storrs was forced to dismantle this tower and transfer the clock to the British Museum in London.[22]

Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori take these three clock towers, which were gifted and/ or demolished by the British, as a conceptual focal point for their project, accumulating various narratives, documents and architectural elements. Referencing a colonial past, personal stories, architecture and geopolitics of the Middle East, *The Owls, The Queen and The Maquettiste* (2018) is a collage of collision points and associations in a fairytale format. The multi-channel video mimics the artists' dialogical interactions and narrates a fictional dialogue between an owl and a maquettiste (model maker). Boyadgian states that,

> *Fictional historiography in this project originates from the role of the nonhuman in urban mythology in the Iranian context. Factual historiography stems from the archival material collected; photographs, film, texts, all revolving around the subject and its memory. The owl serves as a signifier of mythological value, and the maquettiste, the human condition in its banality. The nonhuman and human protagonists shed a light on the question of factuality of fiction as well as fictionality of fact, in colonial history its materiality. Through a dialogical collaboration, we attempt to destabilize historical narratives within the context of conflictual histories and hyperpoliticized social environments that are under the permanent shadow of hegemonic discourses.*[23]

This magical and fictitious domain invites new expectations and instinctive interpretations that challenge viewer perceptions. Its inquest targets the importance of its endeavour, to open up a new visual perspective on the accumulation of images projected onto an over-politicized space. For example, Jerusalem is a site overwhelmed by already established images and narratives. How can the artist propose a visual representation of something that might construct its *own* identity; how might that be perceived with the prescriptive conventions of reading a contemporary art practice?

THE MAQUETTISTE

*We are indeed engaged in work, and work that is vital. Work is a matter of mastering one's time, knowing how to use it. We are paving the way for such a philosophy. We'll give our people a consciousness of time. We'll create a whole new collection of adages and ideas, and spread them all over the country.*[24]

Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori consider any definition based on established geopolitical origins as a problematic approach, and accordingly, draw a parallel line to modes of categorization that affect artistic research, production and reception. This methodology emerges as a strategic move to sidestep what is being dictated and encoded by the central discourses of contemporary art. Classifications that define anyone as 'other' certainly exclude inclusiveness or any common denominators. In this context, Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori offer a simple gesture and modest attempt to remove Jerusalem and Tehran from their respective existences as sites of individual significance, their aim being to deconstruct such a classification, by shifting the position of interpretation.

As Khosravi-Noori notes in their project statement, an environment that is imagined by its signifiers is a "hyper-politicized" environment.[25] This criterion relates to Barthes' notion of mythical signifiers and their formation, in his 1972 book *Mythlogies*: "When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains. There is here a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier."[26] From this perspective, their project feeds from these manifestations; these hyper-politicized environments are hence built by images stripped of their content.

Such an approach raises a further critical question concerning autonomy: how can the artist produce an autonomous work by using the same resources that already contain so much consumed and clichéd information? By apposing two cities with their complex historical, political, social, psychological and economical references, *The Owls, The Queen and The Maquettiste* diverts the audience's attention towards a fictional narrative with new associations, constructing a unique world of reflections. Through this fairytale, Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori succeed in translating elements of their research in a unique and poetic way. Here, the owls have symbolic connotations—there is significant literature and mythology over centuries in various geographic regions centred upon owls. In ancient Greece, Athena was the goddess of wisdom and owls nested on the Acropolis where she lived; they were associated with the goddess and knowledge.[27] In one African culture the owl is either a sign of evil, associated with sorcery,[28] or as a messenger that brings sickness or even death to the observer. In Shakespeare's plays the appearance of an owl indicates the imminence of death.[29] In *The Owls, The Queen and The Maquettiste*, the owls are appropriated from an urban myth in Tehran. Iranian writer Jafar Shahri states in *Old Tehran* (1978), "There are owls in the clock tower. Each time that they appear immense political change will arise. So far twice… it is rumoured that after the Naser al-Din Shah assassination they appeared for three days;" countering both rumour and myth he continued, "I saw them myself on Sunday, 7 September 1941 for three days. Reza Shah resigned. [The] Allies occupied Tehran."[30]

In the tale, the maquettiste is haunted and possessed by the orders from the owls and works strenuously to regulate time for everyone, though he aspires to be architect of his own desires. One can clearly and amusingly detect the logic and its path that Boyadgian and Khosravi-Noori have been experimenting and creating for him.

**BASAK SENOVA**



Notes

[1] Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, *The Time Regulation Institute*, Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawee trans, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2013, p. 52. *The Time Regulation Institute*, first serialized in 1954 and printed as a book in 1961, is a satirical novel about developments in the 'modern' Republican period portraying the contradictory and challenging social and cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. While working with Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi Noori on their joint project, this novel has been my guide to see their project from an alternative perspective. Each section of the text is accompanied by a quote from the book to reveal pathways to this thinking

[2] Asaf Bayat, 'Tehran: Paradox City', *New Left Review* 66, 2010, p. 99

[3] In this context two examples are the Palace of the Sun in Tehran and the Clock Tower at Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem

[4] Eyal Weizman, 'The Subversion of Jerusalem's Sacred Vernaculars', *The Next Jerusalem: Sharing the Divided City*, Michael Sorkin (ed.), New York: Monacelli Press, 2002, pp. 120-145

[5] Yonatan Mendel, 'New Jerusalem: On the Israeli Capital Metropolitan Disorder', *New Left Review* 81, 2013, p. 56

[6] Tanpinar, op cit., p. 45

[7] Rachel Brandenburg, 'Iran and the Palestinians', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace; https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians

[8] ibid.

[9] *De lova de oss en skola, de lovade en Simhall. They promised us a school, they promised a swimming pool*, curated by Hans Carlsson, Skånes konstförening, Lund, 2016

[10] *Desires into Fossils, Monuments without a State*, curated by Lara Khaldi and Reem Shileh, Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah, 2017

[11] The artists' exhibition statement, unpublished but displayed at the venue

[12] ibid.

[13] Tanpinar, op cit., p. 41

[14] This kind of distance also implicates the impossibility to experience either of the cities

[15] Tanpinar, op cit.

[16] The *CrossSections* project (2017-19) is curated by the author, with the participation of artists, scholars and cultural workers, involving meetings, workshops, exhibitions, performances and talks in three cities: Vienna, Helsinki and Stockholm. The project partners are Kunsthalle Exnergasse–WUK (Werkstätten und Kulturhaus), Vienna; iaspis–the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Program for Visual and Applied Artists, Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, and NFK–The Nordic Art Association, Stockholm; Nya Småland in different locations in Sweden; Helsinki International Artist Program and Academy of Fine Arts-University of the Arts Helsinki; Centre for Contemporary Arts Estonia, Tallinn; and Press to Exit Project Space, Skopje

[17] Tanpinar, op cit., p. 314

[18] The project text provided by Benji Boyadgian

[19] Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 289

[20] Mehmet Tütüncü, 'Filistin ve İsrail'deki Saat Kuleleri (Clock Towers in Palestine and Turkey)', *Collected Studies* 1, p. 27

[21] Hakki Acun, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Saat Kuleleri* (*Clock Towers of The Ottoman Empire*), Ankara: Atatürk High Council of Culture, Language and History, Atatürk Culture Center Publication: 402, 2011, p. 171

[22] Simon Goldhill, *Jerusalem: City of Longing*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 146-147

[23] The project text provided by Benji Boyadgian

[24] Tanpinar, op cit., p. 259

[25] Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi Noori, 'The Owls, The Queen and The Maquettiste', *CrossSections_Intervals* Exhibiton Guide, Vienna: Kunsthalle Exnergasse, 2018, p. 9

[26] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers trans., New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 116

[27] James Brooks, 'The Enigmatic Owl', *American Birds*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1991, p. 382

[28] Mark Cocker and Heimo Mikkola, 'Owl beliefs in Africa', *Owls and Traditional Culture in Africa*, Volume VMIV, Tyto, 2000 p. 174

[29] Yogananda Rao, 'What the Birds Tell: Reading Shakespeare's Macbeth through the Bird Imagery', *International Journal of Academic Research* Vol. 3, Issue 7 (1), 2016, p. 131; http://ijar.org.in/stuff/issues/v3-i7(1)/v3-i7(1)-a021.pdf

[30] Jafar Shahri, *Tehran-e Qadim* (*The Old Tehran*) vol. 3 and 4, Tehran: Moien (in Persian), 1992