

DILPREET BHULLAR

*The Witness' Account  
of the Other Side*  
From Cracks in History:  
Azadeh Akhlaghi's  
*By An Eyewitness*



*We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.*  
Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*<sup>1</sup>

The Enlightenment concept of history as a natural progression of ideas punctuated by binary oppositions envisioned the world in a hierarchical order. Instrumental to colonial expansion, the scientific expedition to discover the new world, a *tabula rasa*, was itself in need of a rescue from the timelessness of chaos. The dominant as the progenitor of meaning finds the essentialist subject as ontologically faulty and fit to be appropriated, in accordance with the Empire's logics of origin. The two World Wars, decolonization, and the political revolutions of the twentieth century decentred the notions of linear movement of time, thereby propelling discussions away from the necessity of homogeneity, towards the multiple vantage points of heterogeneity. The transformation to the "epoch of simultaneity," for Michel Foucault in *Of Other Spaces*, sets the course for heterotopia. If, determined by the progression and evolution of history, the spaces of the past eschewed the possibility of divergent perspectives, then in the "the epoch of juxtaposition," the heterotopias "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" the conventional sites.<sup>2</sup> This redressal of spatio-temporal politics offers a fecund site to explore Iran-based photographer Azadeh Akhlaghi's series *By An Eyewitness* (2012), as an alternative view of what is garbed under normalcy in the dominant political landscape of Iran.

Akhlaghi's reconstruction of historical events in the form of the restaged photographs, illustrating the moment of the death of seventeen people standing in opposition to the then political regime, was presented in the exhibition *By An Eyewitness*, at Mohsen Gallery, Tehran in March 2013. Imbricated in the turbulent politics of Iran, *By An Eyewitness* is an affirmation of the indelible impression the historical events of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and the Iranian Revolution (1978–79) have had on the subsequent generations of the country. Despite the fact that the idea of a constitution, the focal feature of Western democracy, was opposed to "the fibre of political thought in Islam,"<sup>3</sup> it was adopted into the political fabric in Iran as a means to oppose the rising impact of imperialism. The increasing awareness of the existence of democracy and legalism outside the world of Iran triggered the surge of the Constitutional Revolution. In 1906, the reigning king Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar approved legislative reforms that paved the way for democratic resistance against autocratic tendencies in Iranian politics. The intervening years before the Iranian Revolution were punctuated by social and economic unrest, culminating in protests against the last reigning king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The resulting Iranian Revolution ushered in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the authority of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Iran was never colonized by a Western power in the strictest sense, yet the shadow of the West persisted, leaving the country in a state of constant political anxiety and social turmoil.

The incidents that Akhlaghi portrays are those for which no easily accessible photographic documentation—apart from isolated examples—is available, especially in the public domain. Akhlaghi reconstructs the incidents through staged photography, recreating seventeen deaths between the two revolutions. Born in 1978—thus being a member of the *Nasl-e Sevvom*, or the Third Generation, of the post-Islamic Revolutionary decades—Akhlaghi has witnessed the recurrent imposition of dominant narratives on history and cultural legacies.<sup>4</sup> The creative intervention by Akhlaghi, born a year before the culmination of the Iranian Revolution, attempts to fill the lacuna of an official history that has been marked by a system of filtered knowledge and circumvented law.

Akhlaghi's work directly speaks to rising trends at the dawn of the new millennium, where the art world saw a plethora of creative minds that spoke about social turmoil, a corollary of political authority. What remains excluded from the realm of the political agenda finds space in the work of these artists. In doing so, the artists engage their audiences to relook at the silences to avoid its reoccurrence. As part of this Third Generation, the artist's transnational positioning (shuttling between Melbourne and Tehran) enables reconciliation, by approaching her artistic idea though a critical distance sans emotional angst. Speaking about the bearing of her own transnational identity upon her work, Akhlaghi says, "I studied computer science, not photography at RMIT University. However, living in Australia for eight years, and travelling around the world during the past fifteen years, gave me the opportunity to understand the same request of people with various cultures for human rights and freedom."<sup>5</sup> When the promises of globalization—of equality and solidarity—were broken, the artist reconfigured the world's complexities driven by disparities.

Akhlaghi's interest in creating this photographic project stems from the Green Movement of 2009 in Iran and the pan-Arabic 2010 uprising of the Arab Spring.<sup>6</sup> The Third Generation witnessed a segue from the years of political reformation under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) to the conformist rule of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13). Beginning in 2005, peaceful demonstrations against Ahmadinejad were systematically squashed. In 2009, when Ahmadinejad won his second presidential term, mass protests were taken over by millennials confronting authority with the question, "Where is my vote?" To stifle accusations against the Ahmadinejad government of hijacking the election, many protestors were taken into custody. These nationwide arrests (incurring fatalities) could not stop the second term of Ahmadinejad; yet it ushered in what is known as the Green Movement. For Akhlaghi, it was the killing of the student Neda Agha-Soltan during a peaceful demonstration in Tehran, that set the clock back to the days of the previous two revolutions. Despite state censorship, the protestors took to the digital platforms of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to mobilize large-scale demonstrations, and to take an antithetical stand to the conservative political discourse.

This also triggered a crackdown on photographers by Iranian government authorities. Photographic images of political agitation, once circulated in print and social media, metamorphose into archival documents. Threatened by this potency of image-representation—an act of veracity upon the event—government authorities implemented a rule requiring permits for documentary photographers working in certain locations. To outmanoeuvre these restrictions, photographers took recourse to the tradition of staged photography: this genre has been synonymous with the history of Iranian photography since the nineteenth century. This alternative pursuit in the hands of the artist strives to exercise the creative freedom that has been otherwise denied. Against this socio-political fabric, Akhlaghi, like her contemporaries, takes refuge in staged photography, by



using technical and theatrical innovation to reconstruct the events from political history that have been otherwise erased from public collective memory.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this essay is not to reiterate the complicated network of body, place, props and time that informs the art of making this form of photography. Rather, it is based on the premise that photography is the evidence of an event that is non-recurring in linear time. Yet, it has the potential to call for an act of redemption. Even if the higher political officials are far removed from the circle of redemption, then the artist, sensitive to the loss of life, extends her solidarity to the family and friends who have lost their loved ones in the fight against totalitarianism. The first step to achieve redemption is to acknowledge the misdoing. Through her photographs, Akhlaghi removes the cover from the varnished 'truth' and revisits the events which bear the scars of trauma, thereby reintroducing the acts of political failing.

When the struggle to document political agitation has remained a consistent phenomenon, from the period of the 1979 Revolution to those events of 2009, Akhlaghi 'turns the pages' of history by retracing the events that denied a citizen's right to live. As a witness, Akhlaghi becomes a politically charged figure who recognizes the events of the past rendered silent in official histories. Instead of perpetuating denial, as history highlights and aggravates the pain and trauma of the disenfranchised, Akhlaghi's visual representation paves the way for remembrance and reconciliation. This act of making visible the untoward event participates in the recollections of the past.

*By An Eyewitness* has garnered attention in addressing the discursive ideas of the post-traumatic experiences of the Third Generation, and as an opportunity to implement a meaning-making exercise by looking at an array of events embedded within the semiotics of photography. Akhlaghi's photographic works hark back to the collective memory of the past and use creative imagination to refashion an ensemble of "miniatures of reality."<sup>8</sup> If Barthes ties the umbilical cord between the photograph and viewer,<sup>9</sup> it is Azoulay's "civic skill"<sup>10</sup> that opens an opportunity to turn the irrevocable past, evoked in the fictionalized world, into a fecund site enabling a shift towards the unseen reality. The orchestrated framing of each photograph anchors a possibility to dissect the powerplay in the dominant discourse that has reduced the dead to disenfranchised citizens.

The ensuing considerations critique the heterotopic world of Akhlaghi's photographs by following Rentschler's understanding of John Peters' article on 'Witnessing,'<sup>11</sup> as a testament of "the veracity of what a first-person witness sees often use pain as their medium."<sup>12</sup> Both the English word "martyr" as well as the Arabic equivalent "*shaheed*" originally signified "witness"; to add *shaheed* in Farsi means "beloved". The overlap of the terms – witness and martyr – has a long history of political and religious connotation, where the witness' testimony on the visibility of the sacrifice made by the martyr underlines the importance attached to remembrance of loss. In this essay, the notion of Akhlaghi's images as heterotopic domains, explores a three-pronged reality of witness. First, as experienced by the kin of the dead. Second, the collective memory of the past shared by the witness serves as one of the many building blocks to the orchestration of staged photography (Akhlaghi as a member of the ensemble cast of the photographs is a double witness to the re-enactment, as photographer and subject.) Thirdly, the audience, while viewing the scenes of death, reinvigorates the position of witness to the restaged historical event, which has otherwise been erased from the mainstream narrative.

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IN MEDIAS RES

*When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation.*  
Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*<sup>13</sup>

Viewing the seventeen works in *By An Eyewitness* is akin to entering *in medias res*: chaos permeates the scene of each dissenter's death. The overall scene in each photograph raises a strident voice to the exigent event of killing and death that it aims to revisit. The scale of the *mise-en-scène* is proportionate to the souring atmosphere, fraught with socio-political tension. The act of elimination by state agencies disrobes the citizens of the right to live, to consequently enforce an erasure of a defiant voice from the political narrative. Following the definition of *in medias res*, the triad: the photographer, subject of the photographs and the viewers unravel the knowledge of the situation in which they find themselves participating, via the channels of backstories: in this case with the aid of archival and oral histories. The photographs in *By An Eyewitness* are lacerated by the truth of history and act as "transit visas."<sup>14</sup> Here, Akhlaghi dons the role of witness, a political agency to play out "participatory citizenship"—the act of taking and viewing images assures citizenship that transcends borders between mediums, between reality and fiction, and between nations. Underpinning this participatory citizenship is an affirmation of the role of subject and viewer as entrenched in civic engagement and political action—that the witness creating meaning in the photograph ceases to be a perpetrator of official history but engages in an ethical practice which bridges the gap between citizen and one dispossessed.

The dramatic effect of Akhlaghi's life-size landscape images—of the demise of filmmakers, poets, political prisoners, politicians, social scientists, an athlete, and university students—is realized through a large team of professionals, to mention the cinematographer and director Mahmoud Kalari, Asghar Farhadi is the chief photographer, and the costume designer is Iraj Raminfar. The catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition has lengthy accounts of the available oral histories and newspaper reports, allowing the audience to have a reasonable knowledge of the events leading up to the deaths. In the pre-production stage of the images, storyboards were populated with references to famous paintings and images by photojournalists, to prepare the actors for the series of steps to be undertaken to prepare the sets of the staged photographs. Works of painters such as Edvard Munch, Francisco de Goya, Kathe Kollwitz, Jacques-Louis David and Caravaggio, as well as the works of photojournalists Georges Merillion, Kaveh Golestan, John Filo and Jürgen Henschel served as points of reference for the flow of the actors' performances in the front of the camera.

For instance, in the image *Azar Shariat Razavi, Ahmad Ghandchi, Mostafa Bozorgnia, 7 December 1953* (2012), in order to add historical value, Akhlaghi draws excerpts from the *Ettela'at* newspaper and *Memoirs of an Odd Physician* (2005) by Shariat Razavi and Gholam Reza, to suggest how three students of the engineering department of Tehran University were killed. To compound these words with a visual composition that authenticates a sense of anarchy, the motion of the people running in panic is frozen within the photograph. To achieve this impression of frozen movement, images by photojournalist Kaveh Golestan, from his *Revolution in Iran* collection, determine the visual arrangement, as does Jürgen Henschel's photograph, *The Death of Benno Ohnesorg* (1967).

This is the only image in the series that showcases disorder in the social fabric following the Iranian coup d'état in 1953—supported by Great Britain and the United States—which overthrew democracy in Iran. The military coup deposed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and placed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in power. The public outcry metamorphosed into a slew of demonstrations against the shah. Sites of education were also not immune from political tension, the shah's soldiers entering the campus of Tehran University. On the morning of 7 December 1953, a day on which there had been no demonstrations, soldiers entered the Faculty of Engineering, killing three students—Azar Shariat Razavi, Ahmad Ghandchi and Mostafa Bozorgnia. Witness accounts of the gory sight of hot water from a broken radiator mixed with blood flowing in streams across the faculty floors are available in the print media. In Akhlaghi's photographic re-enactment, three predominant colours—the mostly black-grey attire of the students, the beige coloured corridors and the red blood splattered on the floor—act as layers to add depth to the form of the image. And, among the students rushing down the stairs, Akhlaghi in her signature black attire and dark red scarf, can be seen looking at the dead student at the foot of the stairs, an almost unmoving witness to murder.

Adjoining both past and present, the *mises-en-scène* of the staged photographs is recreated from the memories documented contemporaneously to events, both visual documentation and oral history, to give real shape to the fictionalized history. Professor in Iranian Studies, Hamid Dabashi observes, "The formal audacity of the pictures is in sharp contrast with the foggy memory that the blissful history has cast upon them—they are the strident visual interpretations of otherwise self-effacing memories."<sup>15</sup> The hermeneutic framework of witnessing the heterotopic world of staged photographs underscores the question posed by Akhlaghi in the catalogue, about springboarding a change in historical perspective: "Is it possible that we come upon a radical opening in the course of the history, a crack in which we see the spirits of the past, the people who fought and died tragically for the cause that we believe in, and walk with them along the streets of our contemporary cities?"<sup>16</sup>

When Akhlaghi addresses her question, to not a select few but multiple witnesses encompassed within "we," she disturbs the conventional patterns of time and space to let the experience of past define the present for a better future, as a collective practice. The possibility of heterotopias laid out by Foucault serves as a fertile platform to achieve divergent meanings within her works. The images of poet, journalist and politician Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi in Qasr Prison, and Olympic athlete Gholamreza Takhti in the Atlantic Hotel, speak to Foucault's ideas of heterotopias as a mechanism to confront the illusion of reality—the sites of prison and hotel are attentive to the function of heterotopia as a means to expose real space by remaining its other. But Akhlaghi takes a step further to complicate the promise of pluriformity that Foucault seeks in heterotopia, to suggest the impossibility of escape from reality, even in the form of illusion, in its entirety against imperious power. The prison, as a heterotopia, shatters the illusion of creative freedom of the poet Farrokhi Yazdi when a doctor forcibly administered him poison. The hotel, that conjures the illusion of hope against the reality of isolation, does not fail to ensure the feasibility of Takhti's death, to cut short a soaring voice against the shah's rule.

More often than not, heterotopias are experienced as a break from the conventional understanding of time and space to act as a counter site, where the tropes of conventional sites are incessantly contested and inverted. In a similar vein, the locations in Akhlaghi's series are turned into counter-spaces to accomplish acts incongruous to their conventional function. Unlike many photographers who produce work from the amenity of their studio, Akhlaghi's stage is delimited to a singular place. Her images are an invitation to her audience to witness Iranian life lived and



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experienced immediately after the death of the subject, or when the news of assassination is received. This is followed by a period of mourning, either in public or inside the closed walls of private homes, or by picturesque mountains and rivers under an open sky. As Foucault proposes, heterotopias are isolated, yet penetrable places. The incidents of killings for a moment breach these locations and beyond, to disavow the undertakings of daily activities and reveal the lesser-seen side of life, rampant with absurdities.

The viewer enters the *mise-en-scène* of the killing of Marzieh Ahmadi Oskuie, a member of the organization Fedayan of Iran (Fedai), who raised her voice against rising economic inequality and censorship of the press. At a crossroads, Oskuie's chador floats in the air as she is caught in mid-fall after being shot by the police. On the right side of the two-point perspective image, we see Hamid Ashraf, Oskuie's friend, being pushed aside by Akhlaghi, who is an active witness to the scene, an exception to her passive presence in the other images. Ashraf's presence is a reference to the personal lives of the two who were believed to be partners. It was unusual for Fedai members to attend the covert meetings of comrades, so it was an exception that Ashraf tried to save Oskuie. Giving an equal emphasis to the archetypal symbols of Iranian culture omnipresent in city streets, Akhlaghi populates the scene with a baker holding *nan barbari* (a typical Iranian bread) at the right side of the image.

When the poet Forough Farrokhzad was killed in a car accident in the Darrou district in northern Tehran, the people on the street rushed to save her. The impact of the accident was forceful enough to open the driver's door; consequently, she hit her head against the curb. The official version of her death has the unconscious Farrokhzad dying while being taken to hospital. The urgency with which people on the street tried to help seems antithetical to the social treatment meted out to her when she was alive. The poet promoted the ideas of women's desires and sexuality through her works that remained unaligned with those notions espoused by the shah. Living alone with her young son after her divorce, Farrokhzad epitomized the individuality denied to the Iranian women of her times.

Unlike the people in real life who shied away from her, the people on the street at least in Akhlaghi's reimagination extend a helping hand before her demise. The driver of the school van along with school children and the photographer do not hesitate to help the dying poet. To recreate the sense of oneness and the significance to inculcate it at a young age, Akhlaghi locates the children as witness to an unjustified death, cutting short the life of a poet and film maker who voiced the necessity of emancipation of women. In the face of an exponential rise of patriarchy, Farrokhzad's work was perceived as a reflection of socio-cultural transgression. Since Farrokhzad had a son aged fourteen years when she was martyred, the scene populated by school children underlines the togetherness shared among a series of witnesses, both in public and in the home.

The killing of Hamid Ashraf and members of the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG) in a covert operation by SAVAK<sup>17</sup> agents in their safe house was part of a larger scheme to crack down on dissenters. Chaos on the streets of Tehran finds a route to enter the safe house of the OIPFG members. The *mise-en-scène* suggests the long hours of tussle between agents and Fedai members before the latter succumb to their mortal fate. Ashraf, along with his comrades, lies on the floor strewn with books. A personal account in the catalogue, of a detained member testifies he was summoned soon after the encounter to recognize the body. In a large sun-lit room, a few steps away from the body of Ashraf, an agent directs a finger towards Ashraf in a gesture asking the members to confirm his identity, illuminated by the bright beams of sun rays.



The reflection of Akhlaghi in the mirror, hanging right beside the two living members, enables her to extend her presence as a witness, from the vantage point of a viewer to the image.

In the image *Ali Shariati, 19 June 1977* (2012) medical attendants move the body of sociologist Ali Shariati from his home in Southampton, England to a hospital. To document the inevitability of death in exile, Akhlaghi restages the passing away of Shariati, who as a leading figure of the Mujahedeen-e Khalq Organization (MKO) frequently lectured on social inequalities and the role of citizens against the shah's dictatorship, irrevocably holding the attention of SAVAK. In an effort to survive and promote the ideas of socialism among the Iranian diaspora, he moved to England where he died within a few days of his arrival. The medical reports stated cardiac arrest as the cause of death, though the real reason remains shrouded in mystery. Unlike most of the images in the series, where the entire scene is re-enacted on a single plane, here Akhlaghi populates the photograph with the protagonist Shariati, his daughters, their cousin and herself spread through different locations of the home: on the ground and first floor, near the door and a staircase. Akhlaghi, who witnesses the scene from the floor above while embracing the daughter who is in shock, could be substituted for a mother figure. The actor at the door holds a blue umbrella – indicating England, synonymous with rainy weather. The weather of that day implicitly traces the sombre tone of the image. The chaos in the streets in the other images is replaced here by the dazed look of the family that wakes up to the news of bereavement, in their newly arrived home. When political unrest seizes the lives of the intimates of a dissenter, the chaos is less about its physical reality and more about how it is internalized to metamorphose into a looking-glass of memory: fragile and in continuous necessity of negotiation.

Like Shariati, Sohrab Shahid Saless died in his home outside Iran. The director of *Roses of Africa* (1992) could not make another film for six years afterwards: "I had three great screenplays, which people in the know thought could be made into a successful film. Unfortunately, one by one they were rejected by the producers, who wanted films with a happy ending – the type of film I'd never made before."<sup>18</sup> If the poet Farrokhzad wrote about the emancipation of women, Shahid was known for his movies that critiqued the social situation in Iran. Infamous within SAVAK, he was forced to leave Tehran and find a home first in Germany, and later in the US. After a few quiet years, he died alone in his apartment in Chicago. His inability to accept America's stand on both Hiroshima and Vietnam is referred to in the publication that accompanies the photographs: "I feel happy when I get back to my apartment because I don't like this world outside my apartment."<sup>19</sup> To recreate the microcosmic world of Saless, Akhlaghi pays acute attention to the presentation of the apartment. Saless' attraction to the writings of Anton Chekhov is indicated by a portrait on the wall in his apartment on the left side of the image. On the extreme right of the apartment, in the open kitchen hangs the poster of Saless' movie *Diary of a Lover* (1976). Nestled between these two is the body of Saless lying near the door. The image is a seamless composition of the first few shots of *Diary of a Lover*, taking the audience on a tour through the apartment. Contrary to most of the images in the series, Akhlaghi is not directly witnessing the body of Saless. She stands far from the scene of death in a corner of the kitchen, to indicate that his body was not immediately discovered, that it took four days for his friends to discover his untimely death from chronic liver disease.

Not restricted to the insides of the home or open places for public viewing, Akhlaghi's presentation of the revolutionary poet Mirzadeh Eshghi's death at a liminal space – in a courtyard – converges the members of family and neighbourhood. The courtyard and pool, the "heterotopia of illusion" in Foucauldian terms, in the moment of killing ceases to convey a sense of perfection

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but acts as a rite of passage between truth of life on earth and the promise of paradise after death. Viewing Akhlaghi's depiction of this murder, the viewer would note the earthy colour of the image rendered in deep contrast, like the majority of the images in the series. The image allows the audience to enter the scene of chaos to unravel the sequence of events. From the perspective of the viewer, to the right of the frame, the poet lies on his stomach, head slightly raised, and one hand slightly stretched towards papers that are strewn on the ground beside him. His lover, with an expression of shock on her face and arms spread wide, is frozen in the act of falling to her knees beside Eshghi. On the left of the image, we see the assailants being tackled by a servant. At the top of the image, three neighbours stand on a rooftop as spectators to the event. Two children run along a low parapet while, below them, in the extreme right of the image, Akhlaghi stands wearing a red scarf, framed in a dark doorway as if emerging from a subterranean level, as mute witness.

Death is not restricted to the home or public streets, but as in some of Akhlaghi's images, the natural landscape serves as a potential milieu to perform such a covert operation. Even for a limited timespan heterotopia is a space to congregate the incompatible: the picturesque settings of Evin Hills, Aras River and Majnoon Island become a living embodiment of the duality of ever-evolving nature and the killing of the dissenters. Samad Behrangi was a schoolteacher who wrote children's literature embedded with political motifs that escaped censorship for a while but could not go unnoticed by eventual moral policing. His close family discovered Behrangi's body in the Aras River after a two-day hunt. The exact circumstances of his death remain unknown, yet Behrangi is hailed as the first Fedai martyr.<sup>20</sup> To lend an impression of scale to the river, it extends beyond the frames of the image. At a distance Akhlaghi is perched on a stone of the riverbank witnessing the entire episode of retrieval: the villagers are seen to be reaching a place where friends behold the lifeless Behrangi.

Along with Hamid Ashraf, the sociologist Bijan Jazani was one of the founding members of Fedai. A year after the death of Marzieh Ahmadi Oskuie, Jazani and eight other prisoners were shot and killed without trial by SAVAK officers in the hills behind Evin Prison on 18 April 1975. To restage a closer-to-life experience for the audience, Akhlaghi prefers panoramic photos. The scale and dimensions of Jazani's image, *Bijan Jazani, 18 April 1975* (2012), is close to the photos of Eshghi and Taleghani: here the blindfolded prisoners are facing their executioners with Jazani's arms raised to the sky. Since it was an undercover operation, Akhlaghi's absence is made inconspicuous by the red scarf lying just behind the line of prisoners on the left side of the image. The absence of the physical body of Akhlaghi obliquely undermines the (omni)presence of the witness; yet the presence of her scarf acts as a reminder of the covert nature of the event and hints at the erasure of its true account from the pages of the history. The reference to Jahangir Razmi's photograph *Firing Squad in Iran* (1979), awarded the Pulitzer Prize, is quite clear. *Firing Squad in Iran* was taken in the early days of the Iranian Revolution when officials feared Kurds would demand independence. As an act to instil terror, Kurdish men, who were claimed to be counter-revolutionaries were executed in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan. While the blindfolds and white bandages of the prisoners in Razmi's image are replicated in Akhlaghi's image, the executioners are made to look more prominent with their perfectly matching uniforms and identical poses.

More often than not, war literature reinvigorates the essence of the claim, "In war, the dead pay the debts of the living."<sup>21</sup> Implicitly, it raises an inquiry if the living acknowledge this debt. In the image *Mehdi Bakeri, 14 February 1985* (2012), of the sprawling war zone of the Iran-Iraq War fought between 1980 and 1988, soldiers killed were designated as martyrs. Since the meaning of martyr is



multi-dimensional, Akhlaghi performs the battle scene when Iran's most remembered soldier was martyred. Akhlaghi witnesses the scene from the periphery of this panoramic image dotted with soldiers, fire, explosions and smoke, focusing on the movement of the soldiers and not the martyred Mehdi Bakeri.

This essay on the multifaceted experience of death by the witness would have remained incomplete without the representation of a final journey. Unlike the chaos on the streets when someone is killed, the grieving crowd of the image *Colonel Mohammad Taghi-Khan Pesyan 7 October 1921* (2012), marches in silence alongside the gun-carriage carrying the body. The funeral procession of Mohammad Taghi-Khan Pesyan, the political leader who fought for the autonomy of the Khorasan region, was attended by close to six hundred people. He was assassinated on the order of the military commander, Reza Khan, who wanted to control the province. Images of protestors are not included in the series, but Akhlaghi makes an exception here when she adds the photograph of Pesyan at the forefront. Similarly, the photograph of Mahmoud Taleghani is presented in the mourning room of the image, *Mahmoud Taleghani, 10 September 1979* (2012). Flowers decorate the portrait photographs of both Pesyan and Taleghani with the colour red, and white in the former, immediate visual referents to the garden of paradise.

To give an impression of the variety of people—from literary figures and university students to politicians and leftist guerrilla members—who stood up against the autocratic policies of Mohammad Reza Shah, Akhlaghi adds the mourning site of Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani. A staunch supporter of Mosaddegh, Taleghani made invaluable efforts to spearhead the Iranian Revolution of 1979 through his writings and oratory skills, which led to him being imprisoned for nearly fifteen years between the years 1964 and 1978. An exception in the series, Akhlaghi's image re-enacts the response to the supposed natural death of the religious leader. Opposed to the rising chaos at the moment of death in the other images, in this a sombre mood is implied as a crowd of mourners strive to pay their last respects. To recreate a state of despair and shock at the death of



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Taleghani, Akhlaghi stages a dual scene, with an inside and outside view of his house. The outside mourners, fixed to the windows to get a glimpse of Taleghani's coffin, are set as a backdrop to the grieving relatives around the dead cleric. Since historical images of Taleghani's funeral are publicly available, Akhlaghi underscores this record with his framed portrait being held by two people to the right of the image. Akhlaghi can be seen to the left of this portrait, kneeling amongst the crowd outside, looking through the window directly into the camera. In parallel, a boy inside the house, seated to the left, gazes straight into the camera lens. It is not a frequent sight in the series to see the actors acknowledging the camera, apart from the artist.

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*The photograph is out there, an object in the world and anyone, always (at least in principle), can pull at one of its threads and trace it in such a way as to reopen the image and renegotiate what it shows, possibly even completely overturning what was seen in it before.*

Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*<sup>22</sup>

Ariella Azoulay's promise of the possibilities the photograph can offer when a 'thread is pulled' and Foucault's reference to the skein of networks as points to facilitate connections, undercut the ontological authority of the norm, a search for homogeneous aggregation. Being *in medias res*, Akhlaghi does not present a denouement with her orchestrated photographs. She opens a possibility for public analysis as a mode of knowledge production, rather than setting herself up as the single authority. This essay is an attempt to encourage a novel perspective of witness in these artworks, one that analyses the conditions in which the people and history have been erased from public memory. Beyond legal boundaries, the visual citizenship of the witness as a concept is attentive to the democratic relations between the political subjects – photographer, subject and viewer – devoid of a hierarchical vocabulary. Overcoming the historically contingent canvas of political life, these re-enactments call for conversation, dialogue and engagement, to look beyond the question of what constitutes a victim and different manifestations of victimhood.

*By An Eyewitness*, within the framework of the complementary world of heterotopias, unravels the matrix of power and knowledge. The subjects of the heterotopic worlds of these photographs are produced both by and within power dynamics, and their experiences are shaped by the social relationships of which they are products. Through this image-making exercise (a form of power), photographer and subject are pushed to tell the truth (produce knowledge). These enactments spearhead an alternative history (another form of knowledge), one that counters what is given and accepted without contestation. For Akhlaghi, to visually narrate a part of history that, for a long time, has been ignored or denied by political authority is a way to reclaim agency from the makers of history. If the construction of these photographs lends a visual language to silence, then the practice of recreation turns into a moment of self-revelation, to initiate a dialogue on the policy of censorship. This introspection, even if fraught with the pain of loss, offers scope to envision a creative space of solidarity and justice by remembering. The uniqueness of these artworks rests with the desire of the artist to revisit the events and represent them in a visual taxonomy that brings about the journey of articulating struggle. The particularity of the events represented in the series, with a renewed interest in the troubled history of a nation, lies in the realization of a parallel between the many pasts and presents of loss and pain. This is not to align the series to a unique

discourse on a nation's turbulent political history—that would perpetuate a recurring error to hierarchize suffering. Rather, this analysis attempts to open the possibility of an avenue removed from the logic of tautology, to encourage a shared voice shaped by historical agency to draw a comparison with and contrast to the past (in)actions and a contemporary struggle of 'us against them'.

Akhlaghi elicits a peripheral history from the dominant political discourse, an interpolator who traces the patterns of similarities in the (dis)appearance of the dissenter. The triad of witnesses, as mentioned prior, of the heterotopic world captured by Akhlaghi, initiates an understanding of the events determined by the eyes of the witness. It resuscitates the necessity to gauge the political struggles of today, entrenched in the power interest of capitalism, empire and trade, as performative events to exercise resistance and reform, not a *tabula rasa*, but on a politically dynamic field. The witness acts as a centripetal force in the visual arrangement of the restaged domains of Akhlaghi, who is an active agent for the photograph's disenfranchised subject to reclaim the right to (re)live, denied by institutionalized politics. The witness is not external to the "margin of excess"<sup>23</sup> but takes cognizance of the choice of possibilities, instead of determining a single meaning. At the locus of the images, the witness oversees the permeable tensions incised into the home, streets, and the picturesque landscape, to engage the audience with collective memory in the present new world.

A photograph, as an act of witnessing and as a site of memory, slips into a tangible repository of a shared sense of belonging. The performative photograph, when approached through the lens of collective memory, disseminates the need to preserve loss in the face of the certainty of political tyranny. The collective memory of the past, as the centrifugal force directed towards the making of these series, is a means by which to articulate new forms of solidarity. The inherent nature of memory to borrow and negotiate opens a discursive site to reconcile with histories of injustice.<sup>24</sup> To override the mistake of an easy possibility of amnesia, these inroads of collective memory revisit and reconstruct the past to acknowledge loss and arrange for reconciliation. If the art of creating an image is to work towards immortalizing a slice of time, then the practice of remembering undertaken by the dissenter's family and friends mobilizes meaning from death against the particularities of the erasure of these historical events.

In 2020, Hundred+Heroines, the UK-based organization that promotes the work of female photographers, featured Akhlaghi as one of the hundred female photographers selected from across the world who have extended the boundaries of their art. In addition, *Contemporary Art from Iran*, as part of the 2020 exhibition *Epic Iran* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, had Akhlaghi, as participating artist, speaking about her conceptually staged photography and how it opens a window into the fraught history of Iran. This re-visitation of *By An Eyewitness*, of the witness entwined with remembrance-led collective memory, makes reconciliation not a private affair but carries the potential to draw interactions beyond borders and boundaries. The reconstruction of these incidents unsettles the exclusionary version of history to reawaken the heterogeneity of remembrance that cuts across a specific temporal-social axis. With *By An Eyewitness*, Akhlaghi offers a discursive field of renegotiation with the past, punctuated with bereavement and struggle that remains never far from the reach of an epistemological search for the critical alternative to the terrain of repressive politics.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias. Des Espaces Autres', Jay Miskowicz trans., *Diacritics* 16, 1986, p. 23

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–27

<sup>3</sup> Farshad Malek-Ahmadi, *Democracy and Constitutional Politics in Iran: A Weberian Analysis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Friedman, 'Iran's Third Wave', *The New York Times*, 16 June 2002; <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/16/opinion/iran-s-third-wave.html>; accessed 26 August 2020

<sup>5</sup> Azadeh Akhlaghi, email correspondence with the author, 15 September 2020

<sup>6</sup> Khurana Chanpreet, 'Anatomy of a murder: A photographer stages deaths to put focus on Iran's bloody history'; <https://scroll.in/magazine/819669/anatomy-of-a-murder-a-photographer-stages-deaths-to-put-focus-on-irans-bloody-history>; accessed 20 October 2020

<sup>7</sup> Scheherezade Faramarzi, 'Beyond realism: Iran's photographers recreate images of nation', *Middle East Eye*, 27 November 2019; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/149341>; accessed 7 June 20210

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1979, p. 4

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard trans., NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, p. 81

<sup>10</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Cambridge: Zone Books, 2008

<sup>11</sup> John Peters, 'Witnessing', *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6, 2001, pp. 711–712

<sup>12</sup> Carrie Rentschler, 'Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2, 2004, p. 297

<sup>13</sup> Azoulay, p. 14

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hamid Dabashi, 'Remembrance of Things Past: On Azadeh Akhlaghi's Photographic Memory', *Azadeh Akhlaghi, By an Eye Witness* (exhibition catalogue), Mohsen Gallery, Tehran, 2013, pp. 50–51

<sup>16</sup> Azadeh Akhlaghi, *By An Eyewitness* (exhibition catalogue), Mohsen Gallery, Tehran, 2013, pp. 52

<sup>17</sup> SAVAK, *Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, Iran's secret police and intelligence service established by Mohammad Reza Shah with the help of the US Central Intelligence Agency in 1957

<sup>18</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010*, London, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 503

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000

<sup>21</sup> James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, New York: Scholastic, 2005, p. 167

<sup>22</sup> Azoulay, p. 13

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India*, London: British Library, 2008, p. 4

<sup>24</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Palo Alto CA: Stanford University Press, 2009