



In reference to making his video *Free Your Mind* (2007), Muja writes, “I thought about how I could free myself . . . from the torture of trying to find myself in the work of another artist.” Through emitting a litany of international artists’ names in continuous procession, Muja attempts to completely rid himself of their presence. Addressing the thin line between welcome influence and overbearing burden, Muja’s work reflects his desire to reclaim artistic sovereignty by dissolving the authority of his artistic mentors. The piece unexpectedly speaks to the process of becoming by illustrating that migration can refer

to both internal and transnational movement, and can be tied to an exorcism of nationalism mirrored in the dissolution of overarching power. Muja’s choice to use an extreme close-up of his own face as he recites the names begs the question of whether exorcism or self-conscious homage will be achieved. But, in the end, the words become increasingly obscure, leaving only hollowness in their wake.

Political artwork needn’t be strident, and these works impart a nuanced, imaginative engagement with the questions they explore. The three “strategies” generate meanings that reach beyond the migrant experience, issuing reminders of the invaluable things that make “becoming” a natural experience for some and a profoundly foreign experience for others, depending on the dynamics of power. Both the visible and invisible mechanisms of repression are present here, but the unique experience of the individual is what resonates with a universal note, tracing a world lost and a world yet to come.

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NOTES 1. Gülsen Bal, “Exit Strategies,” published in the statements book from 1st Art and Design Symposium (Istanbul: Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi, 2009). 2. Peja Dimitrova, “A Step to the Right,” exhibition Curatorial Statement at Open Space Zentrum für Kunstprojekte in Vienna, 2009.

ART OF PEACEFUL PROTEST

One Day: A Collective Narrative of Tehran

Intersection for the Arts

San Francisco

November 4, 2009–January 23, 2010

The city of Tehran has been a hotbed of political unrest in the wake of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection last June. As the world watched, Iranians took to the streets in peaceful protest and their government turned on them, sometimes brutally. For the eight Tehrani artists and one Iranian American in “One Day: A Collective Narrative of Tehran,” the challenge was to create an exhibition that could address fresh psychological wounds without letting politics dominate.

The show’s organizers are Taraneh Hemami and Ghazaleh Hedayat, two Iranian-born artists who have studied in the United States. Hemami left Iran in 1978, shortly before the Islamic Revolution, to attend college, and later settled in San Francisco. Hedayat is a generation younger, and recently returned to Tehran after completing her MFA at the San

Francisco Art Institute in 2005. Their long-distance collaboration produced “One Day,” a complex portrait of contemporary Iran that shows how the country is often misinterpreted by both those within and those outside its borders. The exhibition is shaped by the artists’ experiences of freedom in the U.S., and their peers’ collective hope for such a future in Iran.

Nima Alizadeh’s installation “This is Tehran, Voice of Islamic Republic of Iran” (2009) infuses the gallery with an official voice of propaganda, providing a foil for the subtle subversion of other works in the exhibition. The audio recording of snippets from Radio Tehran includes statements such as, “We are going to show our strong fist to the world” and “There are many enemies awaiting a chance to crush us.” Declarations about Iranian strength and the peaceful aims of the government, along with misleading statements about the U.S. and Israel, abound. The voice is not confrontational; it could be that of an imam or a teacher. Spoken in Farsi, the phrases create a sonic atmosphere reminiscent of Tehran’s streets. On the walls, the same sayings are printed in white. They blend into the surroundings, becoming a supporting element of the cityscape.

In Neda Razavipour’s video *Find the Lost One* (2009), two screens play footage of Tehran citizens walking on a street. In one film, someone has “disappeared.” Razavipour challenges viewers to identify the one who has been erased from the official media record and who has most likely



martyrdom of protesters against the Islamic regime with his sculpture *Captured Breath* (2009). A wooden column emitting sounds of breathing, the piece has seventy-two holes drilled into the sides to represent the martyrs of the Green Movement. Hemami's green neon sign *Yekrooz* (2009), which translates as "one day," could be a promise of freedom or of heaven.

The urban landscape takes physical shape in Hemami's *Turning Green* (2009), a wool carpet laser-cut into a map of Tehran. The work invokes the potential of residents to turn the streets green with democracy, thus bringing life and warmth back to the city. Hedayat's series of drawings entitled "Taxiography" (2009) are also maps, but unplanned. Stuck in the backseat of cabs for endless hours in Tehran traffic, Hedayat turned the constraints of the car ride into an exercise in conceptual drawing. The movement of the taxicab determined the direction of her line. Created after the election, the organic movements prefigure those of the protesters who roamed freely through the streets in the early days. They resemble fault lines, where the enforced social order starts to come apart.

been imprisoned or killed. The difficulty of that task underscores the ease with which an authoritarian regime can stifle dissent. Alizadeh's installation was created as a direct response to the election, while Razavipour's video predates the unrest in the summer of 2009. If both works seem equally timely, it is because the recent protests forced decades of quiet oppression into public view.

In Mehran Mohajer's photographs from 2009, everyone has disappeared from the streets. A chill settles over the silent city, as leaders on political posters look out over empty sidewalks. Flags wave proudly at an empty government building. Made with a pinhole camera both before and after last summer, Mohajer's images suggest that the regime rules the city by isolating its people. Homayoun Askari Sirizi's video of a bird in a cage, *The Auspicious Bird's Leadership* (2009), is similarly critical of the city's policy of house arrest. The work references an ancient Persian tradition by which a bird would be used to settle succession disputes through the selection of a leader who might come from any social class. Perhaps this was more democratic than the current state of affairs in Tehran.

Mohammad Ghazali's series of altered photographs titled "The Red Ribbon" (2008) evokes both the present and the past of Tehran. The images are of Tehrani streets, with buildings on which murals have been painted to commemorate martyrs of earlier revolutions. The portraits of now-forgotten, murdered young men become another half-noticed feature of the landscape until Ghazali brings them back into focus, marking them in red to connect their forgotten legacies with the real bloodshed on the streets below. Saba Alazideh reflects on the recent

Abbas Kowsari brings the people back into the streets in *The Time is 24:00. This is Tehran* (2009). He captures the city in three stacked layers of panoramic photographs. On the bottom, everyday men and women go about their business, on foot or on motorcycles. In the middle, women in flowing chador descend, balletic, down a building's exterior wall. At the top, the skyline is blanketed in smog. The city is alive, but not well. A journalist, Kowsari captured the middle image when covering the first graduation of female police cadets in Tehran in 2005. It was during a brief period when the female cadets were allowed to perform real tactical maneuvers such as rappelling down the exterior of police headquarters. Kowsari documents these fleeting moments of freedom, publishing them in local newspapers that the government frequently shuts down.

At first, the necessity of immediate response to the violent suppression of free speech and assembly this past summer led artists in the show to question the timing of the exhibition. A couple of artists feared for their safety and backed out. Others questioned whether art was an effective means of addressing the issue. What could art do in the face of brutality? What value might the artist have that could compare to that of the activist?

From a personal point of view, "One Day" offered the artists a way to process traumatic events in a proactive way. They could express

Above
Tehran, Undated (2009) by Mehran Mohajer

their grief, rage, and optimism, which, at the time, was not so easy to do at home. They could find validation for their observations and experiences in the community of artists that the show brought together. For the visitor to this exhibition, the most surprising aspect of “One Day” might be how low-key it feels. The atmosphere is charged, but quietly so, and is marked by a foreboding sense of anticipation. There are no banners, no armbands, and no shouting crowds.

In the U.S., we have been shown images of the Tehran uprising, and told that the people are poised to take back the streets. Iranians know better the tragic history of political upheaval in their country. Be it 1953, when the American-backed Shah dismissed a democratically elected leader, or 1979, when leftist students aided the Islamists in revolution and then found themselves the enemy, this past summer was not the first time that a euphoric, youth-driven people’s movement descended into tragedy. If the summer’s events did not bring the sea change that was hoped for, they were a necessary step nonetheless.

Art that is timely must walk a fine line between addressing relevant issues and becoming mired in specific events and experiences. When responding to current events, art must remain open-ended in its conclusions or risk being reduced to propaganda. “One Day” resists telling us what to think about the events in Iran or its future. The images, often firm in their muteness, defy easy reading. They are but fleeting impressions of a city that is keeping itself alive, one day at a time.

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THE ART OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: A History

Institute of Contemporary Art

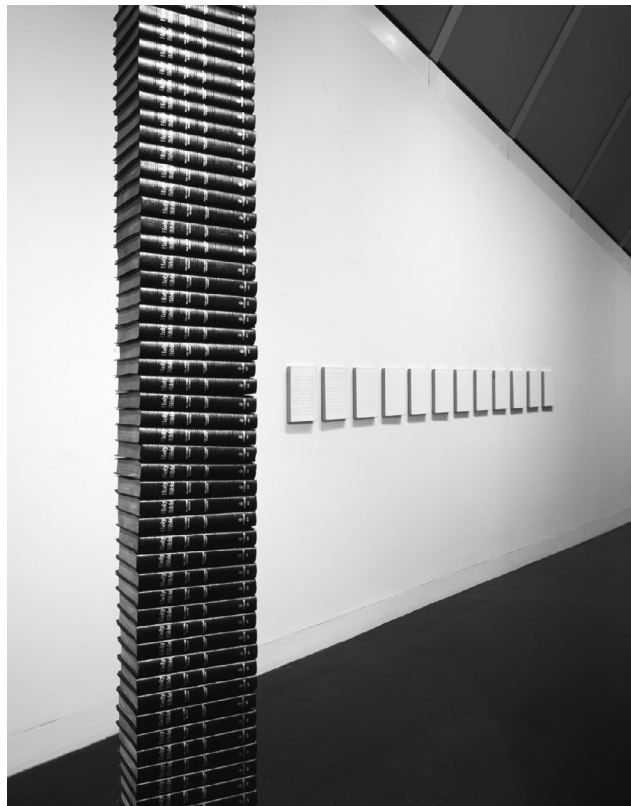
Philadelphia

September 11–December 6, 2009

Art is so important, because it creates a communicative bridge.

In my urban education class at the University of Pennsylvania, my students and I have been reading about the merits and challenges of collaborative learning. Once a week, we work with Parkway Northwest High School seniors who are researching and writing a year-long thesis project. Our goal is to forge a true collaborative partnership. We often question the feasibility of such a project, given the socio-economic, educational, and cultural disparity between urban high school and college students. These ideas were foremost in my mind while viewing the Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) retrospective exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia.

Since the early 1980s, Rollins has worked with underprivileged youth creating collaborative artworks, including large-scale paintings, prints, and sculptures. He began teaching special education in the South Bronx and later opened a studio with an after-school program.



Known for his revolutionary educational tactics of using art as a means to teach history and literature, Rollins began exhibiting the collaborative artworks in the mid-1980s. Featured in many national and international exhibitions, including two Whitney Biennials (1985 and 1991), Documenta (1987), and the Venice Biennale (1988), Rollins and his work have garnered both accolades and criticism.

Referred to as “the pied piper of down-and-out urban young people,”² as well as an “on-call good guy, who teaches the classical

Above

Holy Bible (1987); private collection; courtesy of Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zürich