

Where Romanticism Flirts Criticality

Composing poetry through cinematic visuals, Sara Rajaei constructs her memories of daily life with socio-historical aspects as well as self reflection in her video art/filmic works¹. Recalling particular personal memories is an attempt to link everyday life practices to socio-political issues. What seems to be daily, refers indirectly to political landmarks. However, the first video that I've viewed by Rajaei is independent from these categorical references. It is a rather sensually charged, lyrical work called *Charismatic Fates & Vanishing Dates* (2006). It gently envisages a poem which is written by Rajaei. Just as looking at a face of someone new, or stepping into a place for the first time; it has a mysterious atmosphere. Sorrow, and hidden bliss drives the piece along with its irregular time line. Time exists, within all bounds of possibilities: past, now and future. Time can serve as space, as gesture, or as anamnesis, yet it is a decisive concept in Rajaei's works. It appears as subject-matter to reminisce the past, or as a socio-critical reference in historical context. These two links tend to lead a nonconflicting duality in her works. Time flows between present and eternal. Living a moment, remembering it, then turning it into diverse narratives. What Rajaei intends to do is to refine those memories; simplifying and sharpening them whilst giving them new meanings. What makes her memories peculiar, is that they interact realities in various methods; 'Time, is what we share with one another.'² Particular conversations, specific objects and detailed portrayals refer to certain times and events in order to indicate the past in a critical point of view. She collects memories, and reconstructs them; mostly colloquial ones, or so they seem.

A Leap Year That Started on Friday (2010) sentences written by the artist appear one by one on a white plain screen as she narrates. Illustrating a routine day slowly turns into describing the crash of an airliner.

In 1988, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, an Iranian civilian aircraft was shot down by the US Navy. Rajaei portrays her memory of watching this incident on television in Tehran,

¹ "My works are neither films nor videos, because I both like the aesthetics of film and the free achievement of video. I like the floating magic of poetry, the strong ties of storytelling, the touchable texture of a piece of craft and music. In my work I try to combine all these." From artist's statement

² Quotation from the Sara Rajaei's statement.

without emphasizing the national and historical backgrounds of the actors of the incident. This makes her storytelling obscure and subtle, it takes a certain amount of time to comprehend the context. Watching television can stand for watching attack scenes, where floating boys can be dead civilians, and a stranger who visited home can be one of the passengers on that plane. However as viewing the video, we do not have these informations. It begins with a portrait of a mysterious visitor, through his thick black mustache, old-fashioned glasses, long arms and long legs. Shahrzad, from Pakistan was caught by a fisherman after the airliner was shot down- - *with no head, no arms, no chest and no legs, only his torso. He was identified by a birthmark.*³ Rajaei suggests to viewer to remember this incident with her. Not only to deal with her traumatic memories, but also most notably to rethink an unlawful non-attack that a country conducted on the other one. Essentially, without the information of the victim's background, it can only lead us to the marks of war, rather than victimizing any particular side. This is exactly where non-place related approach comes in. It is a political statement to choose to deal with a covered up incident where civilians, who had nothing to do with the war, were shot because of a so-called mistaken identification. How many people know/remember this incident today? The question is not stated by the work itself, but perhaps by indirect references. The references still remain unclear yet there is no direct association with this incident. The work mainly deals with the memory and idea of war without any direct references or definitions. Towards the end of the video some photographic images of a building begin to occur; as the artist begins to talk about her nightmares just after the incident. Through making this work, she also deals with her trauma; seeing dead people on television, and shocking by knell about the visitor's death. The first time I viewed the video, I immediately recalled my memories of seeing The Bosnian war (1992-1995) scenes on television also as a child. The ones who have not experienced war, often witness via mass media that openly displays brutality. The artist's repetitive depictions in her latest work; such as white shirts, white shorts, pair of white socks and floating in the water, derive from what she had seen on television, or what she thought she had seen. "In the end none of those white things existed. It is even strange to me, but I have this rather calm and white memory of it. It is all because of my first impression yet its calmness and whiteness does not lighten it up, it is indeed a kind of an emptiness which touches you under your skin and makes you shiver any time you think of it or remember it."⁴ She is interested in deconstructing her memories through context cues and traces. By encoding specificity of objects, scenes or dialogues; she interprets her memories in a socio-political

³ Quotation from the text of 'A Leap Year That Started On a Friday' 2010.

⁴ Quotation from Sara Rajaei with her conversation with Didem Yazici, 2010

context. Rather than emphasizing the crucial information of incidents; her artistic method tends to hide and simplify the social background, which reflexively lifts its social effectiveness. This result refines aesthetics of political sense.

Her obsession with particular objects and dialogues began to appear in an early work, *A Day of Amnesia* (2004). We see a white background, no notion of time or space; only four people sitting on the floor as the narrator tells a story from everyday life. It is a story of having a new carpet at home; yet just before the end of the video we understand that a war had just ended on the same day of having a new carpet. Here, war exists as an abstract concept as a little detail mentioned after exchanging the old carpet with the new one. She is very much interested in how we connect our memories to reality, how we remember things; feelings, memorable moments and turning points. *A Day of Amnesia* (2004) and *A Leap Year That Started on Friday* (2010) hold circular and narrative political references, as well as inventing their own way of remembering. Unlike these works, *Forever for a while* (2009) and *Charismatic Fates & Vanishing Dates*⁵ (2006) suggest pure aesthetic experience of cinema. I saw *Charismatic Fates & Vanishing Dates* in May 2010, during my visit to Künstlerhaus Balmoral where she was on residency. Watching it for the first time, I was caught by its poetic atmosphere. I felt invited to walk around a dining room accompanied by the narrator's poem, as the video is shot in first person singular, the viewers almost become characters themselves. Each object in both works holds a persona; as furniture and accessories speak. Candlestick, cello, carpet, wig, photographs, laughs, piano tunes, dim light, all these dramatic elements complete the mystery of the narrated poem. To her, any particular detail from past/today is worth-sharing; any intense "Deja Vu" recalling is emotion and thought provoking. "Last week, last year, I don't remember / Still those all remain together⁶." Time, as a concept in philosophical understanding, or as a tool in order to remember the socio-political events from the past. In her early video *Untitled* (2001), the camera follows chronological black and white photographs of Rajaei's mother on the floor, as they are picked up gradually whilst the camera focuses on each. Similar to *Forever for a while* (2009), this work also deals with different periods of a woman's life. However, in this one woman occurs in a chador by the last scene. The video was made few months prior to September 11, before the image and debates on radical Islam got fetishized. Rather than repeating social issues which might lead to a neo-orientalist approach, the artist's individual language leaves a critical mark. As a time traveller, poet, or a magician of time; she deconstructs / reconstructs it by narrating.

⁵ In the work 'Forever for a while' there is no poem, but only music as soundtrack.

⁶ From artist's poem and video "Charismatic Fates and Vanishing Dates" 2006.

Heiddeger stated the question 'Does *time* itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?' in his cult book 'Time and Being'. We are yet to find an answer, Sara Rajaei realizes her existance through perception of time.

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