

The memories of endless dictionary

By Neva Lukic

Video works by the Iranian-Dutch artist Sara Rajaei have the silence that Simon & Garfunkel wrote about, within which people talked wordlessly and wrote poems never shared by voices. It is the full silence that has deposited all the sounds in the world, which has settled down in the throbbing sound of our heartbeat but still, most of the time, being choked by other vibrations, we can't hear it...

Rajaei's work truly evokes countless references since it reminds us of the primordial element that we have sometimes and somewhere sensed. It invokes Barthes who writes about the endless dictionary from which every new author retrieves existing texts to create a new one. Artists are like shamans, through their work they evoke images, sounds and sentences inscribed somewhere at some point in time or pronounced somewhere at this very moment... And this very act of evoking makes the artist original, close to the origins... This calls for another citation: ...I saw the circulation of my dark blood, I saw love connecting and death changing, I saw the earth in Alef, I saw my face and intestine, I saw your face, I felt dizzy and cried because my eyes saw that secret and presumed object, whose name is usurped by people although no one has seen it: the unfathomable universe.

Iranian poetess reminiscing about her life in Rajaei's documentary *Shahrazad* (2009) can also be easily related to Borges's words. Looking at the Sun makes you feel safe. As if the Sun passes some of its memories on to you... since the beginning of all times. Because at the beginning there was only the Sun..., says Shahrazad Beheshti Mirmiran watching this star, round in shape like Alef... Retrieved from the endless dictionary, video art by Sara Rajaei is also round, it has neither the beginning nor the end and does not belong to any particular period in time. It is about everyone else, it can be talked about through all the others, however, it is communicated through the artist's innermost feelings about her own memories.

Memory is the skeleton round which the video evolves. The creative process always starts with writing or reminiscing, which are, in this case, almost synonyms. Afterwards, images and sound adhere to this skeleton and they always cover the original idea, namely it metamorphoses into a sort of reality bordering on a dream, and into a dream bordering on reality. In many video-works we can notice the absence of some of the mentioned video elements.

The most common is the absence of the image, sometimes the sound is not present, and very rarely the storytelling (the text) itself. By removing one of the components the artist emphasizes that the emptiness left by memory can never be filled. While observing silent faces in photographs, frequent motifs in Rajaei's work, we are aroused by the feeling that something is constantly missing. Or when watching the screen, as only white or black image, in the video installations such as *a leap year that started on a Friday* (2010) and *1978 the 231st day* (2012).

Furthermore, the objects that embody memories, in many cases furniture caressed by the artist's camera, seems as if it seeks to fill the gaps too..., but still, the gaps are felt in between, the full voids of untold, simultaneously rich and flat like a carpet (a recurrent motif in artist's works) depicted in the video *Since we've moved here* (2007): If you have a carpet, you have everything. You can sit on it, you can lie on it, you can eat on it and you can enjoy its beauty, says the artist in the video.

A carpet is also the main theme in the video installation *A day of amnesia* (2004) where voice-over narrator tells the story about it and the camera captures people sitting on the floor in the empty interior, silent and motionless like sculptures, like living pictures (*tableaux vivants*).

The absence of the main object (the carpet) and feature characters in the moving image, leave to the observer the freedom for creating his/her own story, so in this case it comes to the universal, neutral tableau vivant since the dramaturgy of all the scene takes place within the storytelling itself.

This freedom is even more prominent in the work a leap year that started on a Friday with the flowing text, read by the artist in English, remembering one evening in July when she was twelve. It is about a man also called Scheherzad, who got killed in an aircraft destroyed by American missiles one day after his first visit to the artist's family.

Although the video depicts a tragic event, the observer can easily miss this fact, as if the pain had overcome itself. The whiteness of the screen is a sort of purgatory, an emptiness where every single sentence is felt not only mentally but also physically.

The Pink Floyd album The Wall exudes a similar atmosphere, even the wall is as mute and empty as the mentioned whiteness of the screen and we can even recall the sentence: Look, Mummy! There's an airplane up in the sky...

The art of Sara Rajaei enables us to circulate indefinitely, without the beginning or end, it always invokes someone else and something else, an image invokes a word, a word invokes an image, music is like a word, and words are like movements and so on. But isn't the invoking, the echo, in reality the essence of art? When watching a video it feels like listening to music; when reading a book it seems that an image is in front of us...

The conversation on artistic media

-Neva

A strong performative, storytelling element in your work brings the word back to its essentials; hypnotic meaning... It hypnotizes the viewer by the story told... You said yourself "my works are neither films nor videos." What are they, then? Maybe new terminology should be invented, something like - image-literature or literary video...

-Sara

My first actual encounter with the hypnotic quality of storytelling was when the Iran-Iraqi war started. The whole family would gather in one corner of the house or in the basement, in the dark. Our only contact with the outside world was a small green transistor radio. Waiting to hear the safety alarm, we would listen to the radio broadcasts of 1001 nights or other Persian classics, which hypnotically carried our minds out of the danger zone...

Storytelling is an essential part of my oeuvre, yet in my approach towards visualizing a story and through the diverse methods, which I use combining text and image, I often try to work at the thin line between video-art and short film. While making a new work I keep asking myself which side of the line I like to stand on or work with?

My works are both films and videos, and at the same time none of those. Some of them follow a rather filmic approach in their construction, in the way they are shot, edited or presented. But in the content the approach is the opposite; the way I experiment with the narrative or how I begin or finish a story, if there is any, or how I link the images with the words (Charismatic fates & vanishing dates). On the other hand I have works which, at first glance, seem to be conceptual video installations, while in their content they are a classical linear narrative (a leap year that started on a Friday & 1978 the 231st day)...

-Neva

And what is your experience with presenting your works? Presenting videos and films in a gallery/museum space is a very complex thing... In my opinion, in many cases the perfect situation would be to build special soundproof boxes so the sounds of the works wouldn't mutually interfere. At your exhibition in MMSU we also have a complex situation - the voice-

over telling the story is almost as important as the sound, so the works should not be presented on earphones...

-Sara

For every work I have a "perfect setting". But, unfortunately, such perfect settings don't always function. Every venue or selection of works add certain spices to each and every of the art-works, presented in an exhibition. These additions have advantages and disadvantages. For me, a work changes every time it is presented.

-Neva

Why do you always choose to have a form and a content/concept in some kind of counterpoint? Is it subconscious or deliberate?

-Sara

It's both deliberate and subconscious. Mainly because there are various forms of creative/artistic expression, which I am fascinated by...

Writing, for example, how much can you engage the viewer's imagination..., or photography, an infinite moment, which is captured out of thousands of other capturing possibilities. Then, there is sound. I am fascinated by voices, by the way the words are spoken and the way sentences are built. And most of all I am haunted by space, domestic interiors and small objects which shape an emotional narrative composition. It's such a contradictory, and yet, inspiring blend of tools. To make a balance, one is in need of a counterpoint.

For me the working process always begins with an image. A still image, which is not necessarily a photograph but often an image which appears in my mind, sometimes linked to something from the past, and sometimes something purely imaginary. After that image, come the words and then other substances. In my, often long, process of working I shift between these different matters without following a certain pattern. I try to follow my instincts.

-Neva

Seems that for different artists creation starts with the image. It is similar for me as a writer... Maybe indeed "at the beginning there was an Image." Image and sound...

-Sara

The medium I have chosen to work with, gives me the freedom to move in between other forms and use other media, yet with the possibility of getting back to the main path. But what about you, are you as a writer aware that 'the image you imagine' will be transferred into letters, which become words that shape a sentence either in a poem or a story? And now that you have experienced film making, how has that affected your perception of being a writer? And how was it for you to collaborate with me on a film?

-Neva

In many cases I start with the image in my head, or even the existing image of something that inspires me, but there is always also a main idea or a thought (in shape of words) which I want to write about and for that I need language.

The moment I start writing, the language starts to "paste" on the surface of the image. While writing it feels as if everything (image, sound, sentence) melts together, so there is no need to help myself with other media.

What I like about making an art film is that when a word is spoken aloud it gets more power. The medium becomes more physical. Furthermore, I like experimenting which goes together with an art film because it brings an unexpected outcome - from the story, through the shooting part, to the editing process. The final product has nothing to do with what the story was at the beginning... First there was a word, then came the landscape, the birds and all the sounds..., the world in all its transformations!

Making a film is almost like opening your eyes in the morning... Making this film didn't change my attitude to being a writer, because we discussed and made every part of it together, the text was not misused. I think it is difficult to find a visual artist whose sensibility matches yours (as a writer). Our film is still, to a large extent, like literature, visual poetry. And how do you see that? Furthermore, haven't you, as a film maker and video artist who often doesn't

show the image at all (a leap year that started on a Friday, 1978 the 231st day), never had the idea of publishing a book?

-Sara

I have to answer the last part of your question first; my early works did not contain text, neither sound nor even color or title... My first works consisted only of raw-unedited images... When I finally began to write, I wrote with the aim to make something visual, meaning I was aware that not every detail needed to be transferred into words, but could appear in the image...

It's also about 'Authority'. The author controls his writings until the moment they are published. From then it is up to the reader, when and where to read. Imagine if the tragic text of 1978 the 231st day, is read by a reader who's lying on the beach... That's a disaster. I prefer to keep my reader-viewer alert.

In the works you mentioned above; while the viewer reads the text, and absorbs it in his own way, I read the text to him so that he absorbs the text in the way I want, with the timing, the rhythm, and the feeling that I choose... The combination of reading and hearing makes a unique absorption experience... But one has to consider that both works do contain a lot of images in fact..., in a leap year that started on a Friday, I mention the word white over and over in the text, and the viewer is looking into the white. At the end of the work, when I describe the nightmare, the viewer sees one of the settings where the nightmare occurs.

In 1978 the 231st day I talk about black, a disaster happens in the dark of the night. The viewer looks into the black from the beginning until the end of the story. The image is there, but it's rather a whole image which changes in an emotional sense and in relation to the words appearing on its surface. Some kind of "mother image", which gives birth to other unseen images in its womb..., like the black monolith in '2001 a space Odyssey'.

-Neva

What you said about the authority and your works which are mostly created out of pure text, is exactly why I got captured by the work a leap year that started on a Friday. The way you manipulated the text makes the viewer stand and listen... On the other hand, the other day I was reading a book of poems while it was raining outside, so these sounds influenced the way I perceived the poem. I felt it more strongly, as if rain "had upgraded" the poem... I thought how this is so special about poetry - in many cases it takes inspiration out of the momentary observation of the outside world, and later, when served to the reader, it is again surrounded by the outside world surrounding the reader. It is like taking it out of the world, and then bringing it back to the world!

Along these lines, can you tell me something more about your relation as an artist to the culture of your home country and especially to Iranian poetry?

-Sara

Poetry and Farsi language are blended. In my language poetry plays a practical role in daily life. Some of the verses have gradually turned into proverbs, or even to references of cynicism... Poetry is cherished in its classical sense as a true form of artistic expression. Considering all these facts, to stay cool-headed in my work, I chose to write in English instead of Farsi... Somehow my emotional distance from English as my second language brought more coherence to my writings.

-Neva

Could it be that for you it is a good feeling to write in English (your second language) because you add image and sound to your writing, i.e you make films? Because for me, to be surrounded by the language I don't speak and to write in a non-mother tongue is one of the most frustrating things in the world...

-Sara

As I said before, language is not my main working tool. So I can't imagine how it is for a writer to write in a second language. But within the medium I work with, I can certainly say that I

write stronger when I write in English. I can take a distance from the words and analyze my writings better... It feels like a different 'me', a more direct, subtler 'me'...

There also come the times when I truly miss a certain Farsi word or expression; for example the expression 'a drop of tear' in one of my last works was immediately corrected to 'teardrop' by my editor. That annoyed me terribly. But I am mostly satisfied with English. Meanwhile, I am aware that my works are depicted as being poetic... But that's unavoidable I guess...

-Neva

Therefore, if you had stayed in Iran, your work would probably have completely different qualities. How do you feel about it? This endless world of possibilities and paths... (where Holland is a meeting point which brings people of different nationalities, people like you and me together?)

-Sara

My artistic career started in the Netherlands... Beginning to live as an immigrant and entering this blend of cultures, first confronted me with who I was or who I thought I was. Further on, it highlighted which part of me I wanted to live with or what I wanted to either avoid or reconstruct. From that point my career began.

I think for everyone who leaves his emotional-familiar zone and enters a new-unfamiliar world, there comes a period of resistance to change, when the mind goes into a state of observation, analyzing what's been left behind and what is coming ahead. My state of observation lasted for two years, during which period I worked extremely hard at school, but without accepting the new world that was surrounding me. Then I made my first video, a 6 minute sequence, referring to the Farsi proverb 'Aab dar haavan koobidan' which literally means 'pounding water with mortar and pestle', a sarcasm on making futile attempts, fighting for no purpose.