

The Iranian contemporary photography and construction of social reality

Exploring the extensive 180-year history of photography, in conjunction with the geopolitical transformations in Iran, prompts an intriguing question: What is the relationship between photographic experiences and Iranian culture? Specifically, how has the medium of photography interacted with and influenced the cultural landscape of Iran? Furthermore, can we observe the emergence of a creative discourse within contemporary Iranian culture as a result of photography's impact?

John Searle, in his book "The Construction of Social Reality" (1995), presents a distinction between two types of reality: Brute facts and Institutional facts. Brute facts refer to tangible, visible, and physical events that people encounter in their daily lives. On the other hand, Institutional facts are derived from social norms and encompass deeper aspects of events, requiring the involvement of the human mind to reveal their meaning. Searle argues that Institutional facts need to be explained through language, which includes not only verbal language but also any meaning-making systems through which events can be elucidated. In his book "Making the Social World: The Structure of human civilization" (2009), John Searle develops his theory and concludes that linguistic patterns can play a significant role beyond the description of symbolic matters in making and constructing them.

However, when we extend the domain of discussion to the language of imagery and photography, we encounter a challenging situation. While the camera has long been regarded as a precise and faithful tool for capturing real-world events, most semiotic perspectives consider photographs as indexical icons. Nevertheless, photographs primarily represent the reality of Brute facts.

To further enhance the discussion, we can delve into the limitations and complexities of photography as a medium. While photographs can accurately document physical aspects of reality, they often fall short of capturing the full depth and complexity of Institutional facts. Institutional facts are deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and subjective elements, which can be challenging to convey solely through visual representation.

Therefore, while photography can provide valuable insights into certain aspects of reality, it may struggle to fully capture and communicate the nuanced and contextual nature of Institutional facts. To comprehend the rich tapestry of

Institutional facts, language, whether verbal or non-verbal, remains an essential tool for explanation and understanding.

The significance of documentary photography as a specialized genre that frames photographers' experiences in confronting reality has gained prominence. Although it ultimately presents a vast, exciting, and thought-provoking range of perspectives to viewers, all of these elements may not necessarily reveal the underlying infrastructure or the prevailing spirit of the existing reality to us. Apparently, despite the gradual evolution of documentary photography and new photojournalism, which have centered around the subjectivity of the photographer, they have managed to provide different interpretations of the real world and bring order to specific textual worlds. However, all of these efforts alone are not sufficient to grasp the Institutional facts. In that case, it may be better to explore methods of accessing social reality beyond the genre of documentary photography, within the artistic ideas that have the potential to be realized in all kinds of photographic experiences. With this assumption, it can be imagined that the new photographic reality not only encompasses the representation of existing reality but also constructs a part of the meaning of social reality through this very process.

It seems that such an aspect can be found in contemporary Iranian photography. On one hand, if we consider the conditions in Iran as a country that has experienced a lifelong scene of conflicting political and social ideologies such as traditional, religious, conservative, left-wing, and liberal; has undergone two major revolutions like the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution; endured a long and devastating eight-year war with Iraq; and witnessed numerous protest and civil movements, with the recent example being the "Women, Life, freedom", it is natural that documentary photography is the oldest, most essential, and richest tradition of photography in Iran.

Furthermore, the widespread practice of photography through institutions such as universities, museums, galleries, festivals, and specialized magazines over the past half-century, along with the emergence of young generations who have been exposed to the teachings of modern and contemporary art in line with the global trend of globalization, has led to a large number of experienced individuals in the current art scene in Iran. They have sought experiential exploration in various genres of photography and endeavored to adapt their ideas to the expressive

possibilities of the medium. However, social concerns are not excluded from this circle of exploration.

Perhaps the best example to illustrate what has been said is an exhibition that is in front of us. A diverse collection of photographic perspectives and approaches can express a part of the established reality or the spirit of the prevailing reality in Iran today, not individually but collectively and in complementarity to each other.

Let's take a closer look at these works: Morteza Khatibzadeh, Najlaa Dadbar, and Abbas Vahedi capture aspects of everyday urban life in their documentary photographs. Mohammad Abbasi highlights the juxtaposition of children's playfulness alongside remnants of tanks from the war. The red tone in Alireza Memariani's photographs brings a fresh interpretation of the relationship between humans and animals. Photographing the rural life of the people of northern Iran in a foggy atmosphere in Kiarang Alaei's work aims to create a poetic and mysterious atmosphere. The urban landscapes by Hamidreza Amiri Matin depict the chaotic process of urban modernization and the negative impact it has on the environment. And this confrontation between man and nature reaches its peak in the environmental photos of Ali Asadolahi Souteh. In her stage photography, Mahsa Alikhani creates an apologue of the world after death in a coffin-like space and shows people still trapped in material relationships.

Majid Hojati arranges tableaux of cultural consumption on the backdrop of world maps, presenting a juxtaposition of incongruous elements. Babak Kazemi creates visually captivating fantasy visualizations based on Persian mythology in his photomontages. Amirbahador Bayat, Sahar Khazaei, Saba Safaei, and Kaveh Zohdi have all focused their attention on one of the most political intersections in Tehran, namely Enghelab (Revolution) Street. Bayat has created semi-abstract images with a personal approach. Khazaei has tried to portray a deliberate hurried look through the windows of the fast-moving bus. Safaei's view of this street is anxious with a sense of suffocation. And Zohdi defamiliarizes this crowded place as much as possible by placing lonely, wandering, and solitary passers-by.

Maryam Dashti reveals the absence and erasure of individuals and memories within manipulated photographs amidst a family album. Maryam Firouzi and Freshteh Zamani, as female photographers, express concerns about the ideals and aspirations of Iranian girls. The first depicts portraits of young girls mixed with flowers and plants and beautiful motifs. The second photographer creates powerful symbolic representations of femininity and life. Lastly, Shadi Ghadirian, in

one of her famous series, removes the women's faces, limiting their identity to the domestic objects they are holding, which signifies their roles in household chores. These photographers explore different dimensions of women's lives, challenging societal norms and providing a platform for reinterpreting the roles and identities of women in Iranian society.

The culmination of all these images in an exhibition presents a fragmented truth among the various realities, each representing a corner of Iran's socio-cultural life. Beyond being representations of existing social realities in Iran, these artworks can lead us to a deeper understanding of the entrenched realities of this land. They offer a narrative of a land in the historical struggle between tradition and modernity, and the temporary coexistence of conflicting forces. They depict pristine natural landscapes that have been reshaped under the influence of neoliberal policies and transformed into new non-places. They portray a culture that has yet to find a balance between globalization and its local values. They delve into fascinating mythological and historical tales that require a touch of fantasy for their contemporary portrayal. They talk about the People who think a lot about life after death, but apparently, nothing is waiting for them there either.

They highlight contemporary political demands, often manifested on the streets. They shed light on people who are at risk of forgetting their historical experiences and might fall into the trap of repeating bitter mistakes instead of progressing. They capture the mindset of younger generations who understand that to achieve a fulfilling life, they need to embrace both the lessons of the past and the imagination of the future in their present lives. Finally, they celebrate the bravery of women and girls who are the bearers of the country's future, united in their pursuit of Iran's name and freedom.

Without a doubt, everything that has been said only represents a glimpse of the reality of Iran. However, these interpretations are also derived from the generative force of the photographs themselves, a content that the medium of photography has been involved in creating. If I were to point out the most expressive work of this exhibition, my choice would be the collection of "Negin Firouzi": appropriated documentary photographs of the contemporary era in Iran in modern form. From a distance, they appear like strokes of a painter's brush on a white canvas. They capture our curiosity, draw us closer, require patience and careful observation to grasp their details, and gradually reveal their serene content. At the same time, we feel that these documentary photographs, despite their significance, go beyond

mere storytelling of events and summon the entirety of history. They offer an extremely photographic interpretation of a broader and more truthful reality. These photographs are transparent, layered, and scattered, surpassing any explicit expression of the importance of the past in present life. The language of this collection adopts a contemporary tone, and we realize that its completeness is not equivalent to the image itself. To truly perceive the work, attention must be paid to its material and tangible aspects. It is an artwork that can be truly and authentically experienced through close encounters and physical interaction, much like a land that speaks for itself!

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