

## **The ‘Re-articulation’ of Discourses**

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The *Archaeology Of The Final Decade* (AOTFD) is an ongoing curatorial project developed by the Iranian writer and independent curator Vali Mahlouji, who investigates cultural, artistic and historically significant material that has been destroyed, forgotten or under-represented. The aim is to revisit sites of culture in order to re-circulate and re-incorporate marginalized voices and hidden material back into cultural memory and discourse, in order to re-evaluate their cultural significance. The project is focused on the peculiar political, cultural and intellectual milieu of pre-revolutionary Iran. It currently focuses on two specific aspects: the oeuvre of the Iranian documentary photographer Kaveh Golestan (in particular the 61 pictures of the *Prostitute* series) and the censored archive of the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis* (1967-1977).

Both are relevant as studies of contested spaces, of sites of cultural, political and urban development that have been disregarded and intentionally erased from collective memory by the Islamic republic through the all-encompassing and destructive *paksazi-e farhangi* – cultural cleansing – instituted in 1979. Because of this ideological and cultural purification, the material archives have – to date – been banned in Iran. Vali Mahlouji has dedicated the last five years of his career to the collection and preservation of these archives, not only for conservation-sake, but also in order to articulate a different discourse within and around them. This has been made possible by the propensity of other, non-Islamic countries, to exhibit and discuss them.

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In this essay I want to consider the theoretical possibility of the transformation of discourses, in particular the ones preserved by the Islamic Republic about the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis* and about *Shahr-e No*, the red light district of Tehran, through the theory of the archive as “a system of statements,” expressed by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).<sup>1</sup> The essay will focus on the material characteristics of statements, and their capacity to repeat themselves, not through an idealized formula, but as completely different utterances, as explained in the theory of “iterability” of deconstructivist thinker Jacques Derrida (1972).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the essay will take into account the issues at stake with the displacement of the archive in time and space, which allows the consequential re-articulation of discourse. Through the curatorial approach of Vali Mahlouji, we will notice that the revitalised archives can liberate the potentiality for the formulation of new statements, influencing and influenced by the new context and its set of discourses.

“Archaeology describes discourses  
as practices specified in the element of the archive.”  
-Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup>

The type of investigation implied by AOTFD is archaeological, as suggested by the title, and is enacted in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault describes archaeology as the specific methodology of historical research that studies the formation and transformation of discourses – systems of statements – and questions their stability and permanence over time. However, it does not entail a vertical excavation to find the origins, to which is attributed the *raison d'être* of discourses and their unity.<sup>4</sup> Instead, for Foucault, archaeology believes in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge* (1969), trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context” (1972), and “Limited ink: abc...” (1977) in *Limited Inc*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, 148.

<sup>4</sup> “Archaeology does not imply the search for the beginning; it does not relate analysis to the geological excavation. It designates the general theme of description that questions the already said at the level of its

discontinuity of history as a succession of discourses; it acknowledges and analyses differences rather than trying to reject them, refusing the continuity of traditional historiography in favour of a deeper analysis of the conditions which yield to the emergence and sequential substitution of discourses.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, archaeology studies the successive emergence of discourses (and their differences) not only in the object, but in the context from which they emerge: “[archaeology] provides the principle of discursive articulation over a chain of successive events; it defines the operators by which the events are transcribed into statements.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, AOTFD is interested in recovering marginalised positions that were ignored in the formulation of some specific discourses. The latter have maintained their unity over time, because they emerged from a set of rules of formation – those of political contestation, which have been later preserved by the Islamic Republic. AOTFD pursues the re-articulation of these statements through the inclusion of other disregarded perspectives and via the new rules of formation (set of possibilities) offered by the re-appearance of these archives after almost 40 years, as well as by their displacement in Western countries.

The discourses that AOTFD wishes to reformulate are the deleterious evaluations made about the Festival and the discourse used as justification for the physical demolition of the red-light district. Both were produced through the contestations compounded by the Islamic revolution and they became naturalised as common perspectives during the Islamic Republic.

In relation to the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis* (1967-1977), several contestations were endorsed by different political groups and from diverse intellectual standpoints during the 11 years of its duration. For instance, the communists judged it for its royal patronage and

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discursive formation: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation and the general archive system to which it belongs.” Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, 148

<sup>5</sup> “It takes as object of description what is usually considered an obstacle: its aim is not to overcome difference but to analyse them.” Ibid., 188

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 185

accused it of being a superfluous cultural event and an elitist form of culture that the Iranian population did not need at the time. On the other hand, the Islamists considered the cultural content and motivation of the festival as morally decadent: “the wrong act, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.”<sup>7</sup> With the beginning of the revolution the festival was ceased and its archival records banned.

In relation to the Citadel of *Shahr-e No* in Tehran, the walled red light district of the Iranian capital, the Islamist position was drastic. The Citadel was physically destroyed and some of the prostitutes living there were executed. It was considered an uncomfortable dark side by the state and it had to fall into the hands of ideological cleansing. Kaveh Golestan’s portraits of the prostitutes living in *Shahr-e No* have not been shown since 1978, when an exhibition of the prostitute series was held at the University of Tehran.

The discourses that have arisen from the moral purification of the Islamists have remained uncontested, because of the impossibility created by the Islamic state to propose a different reading of the events. As Foucault remarks, “the unity of a discourse is based not that much on the permanence and the uniqueness of the object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed.”<sup>8</sup> This means that the permanence of the discourse – on which one can also erroneously base its relevance, even its truth-value – does not imply its object (i.e. the actual program and achievements of the festival or the actual conditions in the red district) as much as the rules that allow its formation and permanence. Hence, the *actual* cultural importance of the pioneering festival as a multicultural event, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Islamist political contestation in Vali Mahlouji, “Perspectives on the Shiraz Arts Festival: A Radical Third World Rewriting” *Iran Modern*, (New York : Asia Society Museum, 2013) retrievable at <http://asiasociety.org/arts/creative-voices-muslim-asia/perspectives-shiraz-arts-festival-radical-third-world-rewriting>

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, 40.

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relatively liberal laws and social services, despite the poor conditions of the prostitutes' lives inside *Shahr-e No*, are completely neglected in these discourses.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand, at this point, the importance of the archive as an abstract entity that regulates the emergence of statements. There can be different statements on the same subject, because their formation is governed by the context more than by their actual object. Therefore, the displacement of the archive in another context modifies the archive itself, because it allows the emergence of elements of the archive that were previously obfuscated, thus producing a whole new set of rules of formation for different statements.

“The archive is the system  
that governs the appearance of statements”  
-Michel Foucault<sup>9</sup>

The archival material collected and managed by Vali Mahlouji includes different media for both projects. For the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis (1967-77)* Mahlouji has retrieved photographs, video recordings, catalogues, bulletins, programs, and recorded interviews. For the other project, he has obtained the administration of the entire oeuvre of Kaveh Golestan from the owner, Golestan's widow, which comprises the 61 photographs from the *Prostitute* series, as well as, several hundred thousand negatives (mostly never seen) documenting social and political history, alongside some experimental works obtained by using polaroid films. The curatorial approach undertaken by Mahlouji does not only entail the exhibition of the resuscitated archives, but also their re-elaboration through a variety of activities, which address the archive as an abstract entity, a compound of possibilities for the enunciation of statements.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 145.

This variety of activities includes the display of the archives in exhibitions, along with a continuous archaeological research elaborated through publications and symposia. The multiplicity of actions that are possible for a single archive, constitutes what Beatrice Von Bismark calls the “constellational activity of the curatorial” in her conversation with Irit Rogoff on the main difference between the gesture of curating and the interdisciplinary operation of the curatorial.<sup>10</sup> This procedure facilitates the emergence of previously neglected aspects of the contested sites, which – alongside the displacement of the archives and their interaction with new contexts – enable the creation of a platform for the articulation of new knowledge. Thus, AOTFD also embodies Irit Rogoff’s idea of the curatorial as an “epistemic structure,” where discourses intermingle, constituting a new set of possibilities for knowledge to emerge.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the methodology of the curatorial better assists the liberation of the archive’s potential to support the emergences of new statements.

The curatorial approach, and the resulting emergence of new knowledge, yield to confront the dominant discourse established for the pre-revolutionary milieu in Iran, which has been naturalised throughout the consolidation of the Islamic regime. Nevertheless, the displacement of the archives in a new context implies their interaction with other discourses to which they were not formerly exposed. In this regard, the constellational activity of the curatorial challenges not only the hegemonic positions established in relation to the contested sites, but also the dominant discourses of the context in which the archives are displaced. Hence, if the construction of new epistemic platforms allows, to some extent, the contestation of established hegemonic positions, it can also strengthen others just as much as the

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<sup>10</sup> Irit Rogoff and Beatrice Von Bismark, “Curating / Curatorial“ in *Cultures of the curatorial* edited by Beatrice von bismark, john schaffaff, Thomas weiski (London: Sternberg Press 2012), 31. Where they argue that the gesture of curating is implied in the curatorial and it is intertwined with many other possible activities that can be related to the gesture of showing art.

<sup>11</sup> Rogoff and Bismark, “Curating / Curatorial,” 29.

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dominant. For example, the possibility of exposing archives – banned in their country of origin – in powerful Western institutions might reinforce their diplomatic claim to support foreign cultures and their exhibition without imposing any type of restriction.

In particular, the individual projects of AOTFD titled *Re-Creating Shahr-e No* and *Re-Tracing a Utopian Stage: Festival Of Arts, Shiraz Persepolis (1967-1977)*, were exhibited as two smaller sections of a wider display, co-curated by Vali Mahlouji alongside four other influential curators, Catherine David, Odile Burluraux, Morad Montazami and Narmine Sadeg. The exhibition, titled *Unedited History (Iran:1960-2014)*, was held in Paris at the Musée d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris in 2014 and then moved to MAXXI in Rome. Thus, Mahlouji's sections had to confront, not only the hegemonic discourse of important Western institutions, but also the broader discourse of the exhibition as a whole. Therefore, Mahlouji has attempted to operate within an autonomous zone across the political minefield of pre and post revolution within an exhibition, which tries to present a continuum across the revolutionary juncture. In the catalogue essays, the wall texts, and throughout the various publications, his two projects always appear as part of a unique project under the name of *Archaeology of the Final Decade*. Through this expedient, he offers the possibility of different interpretations coexisting within the same context and makes it possible to understand a different reading of the pre-revolutionary decades in Iran. Nonetheless, the mutual influence is unavoidable, and the articulation of new statements depends on which possibilities one decides to privilege.

Having identified the capacity of curatorial activity to release the archives' renovated potential for revealing new sets of rules for the formulation of statements, (especially when it interacts with new contexts and its discourses), it becomes necessary to understand the

possibility of statements to repeat and to renovate themselves. Foucault says that the statement exists by virtue of its enunciation.<sup>12</sup> However, the essence of the statement cannot be reduced to the moment of its enunciation, because this is unrepeatable – while the statement can be repeated, questioned and transformed as it has a material existence in the world.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Foucault specifies that for this essential characteristic, the statement is not to be considered either relevant only for its moment of emergence, or as an idealized form to be reproduced; instead the statement changes as the rules of formation change in different times and spaces:

“The statement must not be treated as an event that occurred in a particular time and place, and that the most one can do is to recall it in an act of memory. But neither is it an ideal form that can be actualized in any body, at any time, in any circumstances in any material conditions.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to its material essence, what allows the transformation of the statement is the set of guidelines that determines its emergence. Therefore, the displacement of the archive, considered the compound of possibilities and impossibilities of enunciation, is a crucial component for the transformation of statements. The curatorial activity disentangles this bundle of possibilities; for instance, the curatorial activity of Vali Mahlouji takes into account some of the aspects that were disregarded by the previous discourses and then communicates them. What distinguishes his position from many others’ is that he does not embrace his

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<sup>12</sup> “There is a statement wherever one can recognize and isolate an act of formulation—something like the speech act of the English analysts. [...] act of formulation refers to the operation that has been carried out by the formula itself, in its emergence: promise, order, decree, contract, agreement, observation.” Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> “The materiality of the statement is not defined by the space or the date of its formulation; but rather by its status as a thing or object. A status that is never definitive, but modifiable, relative, and always susceptible of being questioned.” *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.



perspective as the only one possible, but instead as a new one capable of showing something that remains hidden by the others. The various displacements, which, first of all, occur in the process of moving the archives from Iran to the West, and then from one exhibition to another, allow the communication of a certain position. Most of all, these displacements permit the continual renovation of epistemic structures onto which one can construct new readings of the archives and from them elucidate new knowledge.

The deconstructivist theorist Jacques Derrida analyses the significance of displacements through the critique of J. Austin's speech act theory, in his essay *Signature Event Context* in 1972. Derrida's critique focuses on the restrictive conditions for the performativity of the speech act, which has to derive from the specific intentionality and develops in specific contextual circumstances. He writes: "it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way or ways appropriate [...] the speaker should also perform certain other actions, whether physical or mental."<sup>15</sup> Whereas Foucault particularly criticises the lack of a subject in the enunciation of a statement and formation of discourses, Derrida only displaces the importance of intentionality, and concentrates on the communication itself, for which the receiver also becomes irrelevant:

“my communication must be repeatable- iterable – in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability (iter, again, probably comes from itara, other in Sanskrit, and everything that follows can be read as the working out of the logic that ties

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<sup>15</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 8.

repetition to alterity) structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved.”<sup>16</sup>

This iterability of communication is essential to an understanding of the possible change of meaning performed by the archive in its displacement. Moreover, the exhibition of the archive can be considered as a platform for the enunciation of a specific utterance; therefore, the displacement of the archive from one exhibition to another can change that utterance, as other epistemic platforms are created – therefore – other enunciations become possible. Derrida remarks that iteration provokes alteration in his later essay *Limited inc: abc...* (1977), in which he writes: “iteration is at work, constantly altering, at once and without delay whatever it seems to reproduce [...] iteration alters, something new takes place.”<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, Foucault then Derrida refuse the idealised form of repetition; for them, any repetition is always something different, and it is on this practical ground that theoretical discourses are formulated, not in the Platonic realm of ideas, as the post-colonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, for them it is the “arena of practice [to be the] production of the theoretical discourse.”<sup>18</sup>

To conclude I wish to show the particular transformation of statements in relation to the re-emergence and displacement of the two archives of *Archaeology of the Final Decade*.

The archive of the sub-project *Re-Creating Shahr-e No: The Intimate Politics of the Marginal* is formed of Kaveh Golestan’s series of 61 black and white photographs from the *Prostitute* series. These photographs represent a point of departure for a deeper and much more complex research on multivalent intersections of art, society, law and religion before

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Sara Harasym, (ed.) *The Post Colonial Critic: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge 1990), 88.

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the revolution in Iran. The archaeological investigation discloses the uncomfortable relationship between the state and the darker parts of its society, which exist as the fabric of its own urban reality. Moreover, it unveils the ideological justification for a brutal elimination of an entire part of the capital, the red light district, via violent cultural cleansing, which was falsely advocating a moral purification. Central to this enquiry is the notion of erasure of social material and collective memory. The more liberal political attitude, under which *Shahr-e No* emerged and survived, is presented to the contemporary Iranian population as decadent; it was disguised only for political purpose, in order to constitute a new regime. The project discusses these issues and proposes a new reading of the red-light district, but first of all, it reintegrates the memory of its existence, in order for new readings to take place.

*Re-Tracing a Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis (1967-77)* revives the archive of 11 years of performances of theatre and dance, music concerts, symposia and intellectual encounters. The festival was superficially evaluated, accused of elitism and decadency. It was eventually stopped and the entirety of its archival material was censured. The festival was deemed as another chance for the Western avant-garde to exploit the Third World, without giving it any space to foreground its own, traditional forms. The revival of the archive allows the possibility of a deeper analysis of the festival, its purpose and possible fulfilment. The new perspective on the festival shows that it was – on the contrary – a pioneering cultural event, aspiring at universal multiculturalism, able to maintain differences and uphold aesthetic unity. Moreover, 70% of the performances were from the south and east regions of the globe, with avant-garde movements coming from all over the world, not only from the modernising West. The pivotal issue in the analysis of the festival is the discourse around the cultural relation between binaries, such as East–West and tradition–innovation. Through the revival of festival’s archive, it is possible to see how the curatorial approach of

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this pre-revolution, cultural event took a very democratic stance; it was a precocious attempt to overcome these oppositions and to create a platform for their coexistence. For example, the festival gathered performers and musicians from all over the world; exposing traditional forms of ritual and ceremony as much as innovative practices. It showed how the former particularly influenced the latter in terms of aesthetics and how their experimentalism was contrasting the hegemonic trend of the Western, text-based performances.

From these few examples, it is already explicit how the Shiraz Persepolis festival created a platform for the re-articulation of knowledge in relation to aesthetic practices in a complex period of political changes—the post-colonial period of political and cultural independence claims. This perspective could not have arisen earlier because the possibilities of its formation were completely neglected and hidden by a superficial account of its history shaped by censorship. Today, as the curatorial approach of the festival was trying to create a space for a diverse articulation of knowledge, so the revival of its archival material can create a new epistemic platform.

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