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MEMORY CARTOGRAPHY AND THE POLICY OF SPACE

Bahar Majdzadeh

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MEMORY CARTOGRAPHY AND THE POLICY OF SPACE

IRAN 1979–1988

Bahar Majdzadeh

Media artist, photographer, sculptor / Iran

Very soon after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the new authorities started to repress their political opponents. The opposition was made up of different groups with various ideologies which had all participated in the revolution, but who very soon opposed the dictatorial methods used by the new regime. From the summer of 1981 until the beginning of the summer of 1988 more than twelve thousand political prisoners were executed in the prisons of Iran, a majority of whom were sympathizers of leftists groups or of the Mojàhedin-e Khalq organisation (a group that had combined Islam with communism).

In the summer of 1988 when Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) was almost finished, the Islamic Republic committed a political massacre; almost all the political prisoners who were still alive at that time were murdered all over the country. Within two months between three and five thousand persons were killed by the regime. Still today nobody knows the exact figure of the people executed during this decade.

In the same period, more than one thousand of these opponents escaped Iran. In this article I will discuss how the official map of Tehran reflects only one of the tragedies of the 1980s (the Iran-Irak war), and how this map can also be used to show the absence of the ones who were excluded from the political life (see my artistic work). The article examines how the Islamic Republic of Iran took control of the public realm by way of renaming streets, destructing some buildings and constructing new ones. It suggests that the official map of Tehran, that reflects these transformations, serves the current political power, while also echoes the obstinate memories of the militants of the 1980s. The essay also takes a close look at the relationship between the map, space, and memory through the study of other artists' works, in particular the memory maps of Nikolaus Gansterer.

INTRODUCTION

In February 1995, during a conference titled 'memory, history, and oblivion', held in the Wisdom and Religions Research Center in Tehran, Paul Ricoeur spoke about a conflict that got his attention; one between the witnesses of events and historians.[1] He talked about his generation that was disappearing, the one that witnessed in Europe between 1939 and 1945 the worst atrocities of humanity. He explained that for the last survivors of this generation the relation that exists between history and memory is somehow problematic. For him, the historian is the one who documents and makes available the memory of these people. He added that the interest shown in the disagreement that sometimes opposes historians to witnesses of events, helps understand what precisely in history doesn't belong to memory, and what memory cannot be transmitted to history. Ricoeur thinks that only a personal experience of history allows to have a critical understanding of it.

Following Paul Ricoeur's words, I took an interest in this opposition that led me to focus on the witnesses of the 1980s politicide in Iran, those who were usually absent from the historical narrative of post-revolutionary Iran.[2] I was more particularly interested in the political exiles who were forced to leave Iran during the 1980s and never returned. I asked these exiles to share a memory linked to a place in Tehran and I recorded their voices that I broadcast on the official map of contemporary Tehran, at the spot each participant indicated to me. I called this mapping 'the map of the absentees'. Nineteen political refugees whose exile originated in episodes of political violence that occurred between 1979 and 1988 have participated in the creation of this map. More specifically, they were militants of different political currents who were involved in the revolution against the Shah, and later opposed the new repressive Islamic regime. Consequently, in order to stay alive or to continue their political struggle they had no choice but to leave their country. Overall, I recorded about three hours of stories ranging from 3 minutes to 20 minutes. My intention was to represent, on the official map of Tehran, an exiled memory through places which constitute memories for the political militants of the 1980s that I questioned. This map, with its alternative stories, is neither a guided tour, nor a history lesson - it offers the possibility to confront with other memories than the one approved by the state, and to wonder about what the Other has lived and endured. Thus, their exile, on this map, is represented through their absence in their own country.

[1] Ricoeur, P. (1995) 'Memory, history, and oblivion', *goft o gu* n°8, pp.47-59 (in persian).

[2] A politicide is the promotion and execution of policies by a state or its agents which result in the death of a substantial portion of a group. The victim groups are defined primarily in terms of their hierarchical position or political opposition to the regime and dominant groups. Harff, B and Gurr, T.R (1988) 'Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases Since 1945', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 359-377.

1. THE ORGANISATION OF SPACE AND THE HIDING OF THE TRACES OF THE 1980s DECADE

During the uprisings that occurred in the modern history of Iran, public spaces were often occupied by the population. Right after the 1979 Revolution, people from all social classes and political backgrounds started to debate spontaneously in the streets of Tehran. Very soon after the revolution, in order to monopolise the power and to appropriate public spaces, the I.R.I. attempted to destroy all 'spaces of appearance', in the political sense. Political opponents could not appear as such in the public realm and didn't have spaces of expression anymore (such as TV, radio, and newspapers).

In addition to the fact that Tehran, during the whole decade of the 1980s, was a place where the corpses of the war martyrs were sent back to, and was a prime target of Iraq's bombing, it was also the scene of political crimes. In Tehran, the memory of these years has been voluntarily muddled by the I.R.I. which, by intervening in the public spaces, has modified the city's face and therefore its perception. Nothing today in the urban landscape of the Iranian capital shows the scope of the tragedy that occurred during these years. Those in power tried, by imposing their ideology, to 'clean' the capital of all the other political movements and their memories. In this way, the I.R.I. also wanted to draw a line between the authorised memories and the forbidden ones, between what Iranians had the right to remember and what they had to forget. These interventions in space constitute a violence that leaves other memories of that period in the shadow. This policy of selective memory makes one wonder about the memories that since the advent of the I.R.I. have been excluded and are absent from the public sphere, in other words the memory of those who were repressed by the I.R.I..

During eight years of Iran-Irak war (1980-1988) five successive waves of missiles were dropped on Tehran, entire neighbourhoods were razed to the ground and many of their inhabitants died. Yet, there is no trace in the capital city of the bombings and destruction. However, a lot of streets and highways were given names of martyrs of war. Indeed, war was a unique opportunity for the I.R.I. to take possession of the narrowest streets and of the widest avenues of the city. Naming streets with war martyrs' names, even if it can be seen as a symbolic reparation for a death or as a kind of commemorative act, has, above all, allowed the I.R.I. to spread into the public space

a politically oriented and partisan version of the Revolution. Indeed, right after the 1979 Revolution, the Tehranis had given to many streets and public places the names of militants killed under the Shah's regime and of leading figures of political movements and parties, ranging from the left wing to the nationalists.

This way, the political pluralism of the revolution had left its mark through the naming of the streets. With the beginning of the physical elimination campaign of the members of political groups opposed to the I.R.I., the Islamic Regime put an end to these popular and spontaneous initiatives and erased from the streets all these names. Concerning the streets' naming, the aim of the I.R.I. was not only to use the martyrs' names, but it also intended to erase Iranian names that were related to the history and the culture of Iran, and anything that could remind of the Pahlavi reign. Streets named after American presidents also had to be renamed, as well as buildings that most of the time were given Islamic names.[3] For the Islamic regime, this policy was an instrument for the legitimization of its power.

It was implemented to prevent the transmission of memory between generations, by erasing the stories to which the street names referred. In doing so, it tried to remodel the memories and to assert its hold on the past. 'The use of streets' names for commemorative purposes is instrumental in transforming the urban environment into a virtual political setting. A setting is an active participant in a social interaction', wrote British sociologist Anthony Giddens.[4] For the I.R.I., naming and renaming streets has always been an expression of power, a sign of appropriation, and a way to organise space. These names that visibly express the ideology and the stranglehold of this regime are symbols that assert their control of the public sphere, and through it, the control of the historical consciousness. The street names in Iran reflect what one may keep and share from the past. As Maoz Azaryahu, an Israeli specialist in cultural geography says:

The main merit of commemorative street names is that they introduce an authorized version of history into ordinary settings of everyday life.[5] Their power lies in their ability to make a version of history an inseparable element of reality as it is constantly constructed, experienced, and perceived on a daily basis.[6]

Street names legitimize this official and authorised version of history thanks to their integration into the public spaces and in the everyday living spaces. This street naming policy that keeps the memory of war alive originates from a political thought of space which I call overexposure policy on the one hand, and annihilation policy on the other hand. Since the violent practices of the I.R.I. were generally not clandestine, in most cases they left traces in the space and modified it in a visible way. The spatial reorganisation that is a demonstration of the state violence have translated into the destruction or the disappearance of several places but on the other hand, into the emergence and transformation of other places.

This is a violence that has left its mark on the urban and peri-urban landscape, and it is at the same time a policy of exception applied to the space, which makes some traces visible but hides others. It results, in fact, in a selection among the traces of the past, some being kept and sometimes overexposed, and others being destroyed and hidden. The I.R.I. managed to make the memory of some social groups invisible and to highlight the memory of other groups. This policy of transformation of public space had also effects on the

official map of Iran. It gave the urban space a political dimension that was transposed on the map of the city, which took on a new significance. A fusion took place between the 'authorised' past and the map. Azaryahu writes:

In their capacity as a particular mapping of space and time, commemorative street names provide a distinguished 'map of meanings'. In their capacity both as historical references and as spatial designations they provide for the conflation of history and geography.[7]

On the authorised map of Tehran, the only visible traces of this era of rebellion and erasure of memory are these street names, but yet, on this map I tried to make other traces appear. Official maps always reflect the reality of the political power that they serve. In that respect, the use of this map in my works is not neutral, because Tehran's map has always served the authority in power.

In my work, the official map of Tehran, designed to serve the autorized history of the current political power, echoes the 'obstinate' memories of the 1980's exiled militants. In my cartography, I place the map that the I.R.I. uses to reflect the history it fabricated, at the heart of the memory tension.

What is important here is not so much the map as such, but rather the way I chose to put it in the center of my artistic project, or as the US-American artist and cartographer Dennis Wood says:

Map artists claim the power of the map to achieve ends other than the social reproduction of the status quo. Map artists do not reject maps. They reject the authority claimed by normative maps uniquely to portray reality as it is, that is, with dispassion and objectivity.[8]

The map allows the artist to intervene, which means, to investigate in a different way, so as to represent and to bear witness to the unseen which can then get a precarious visibility. I resort to the official map of Tehran in order to reform its use or to question the authority supposedly given to this map by the power. However I do not modify it, I give it the role of an artefact. The present official map of Tehran that I have used for my work is comparable to a person who has become insane. I chose it as a medium although for political reasons its relation with the historic memory of contemporary Iran is somewhat ambivalent, and it is admittedly incomplete.

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[3]For further readings : Yazdi. P. M. H. (1992) 'Le nom des rues de Téhéran', in Adle, S. and Hourcade, B. (under the supervision of), *Téhéran, capitale bicentenaire*. Paris: Institut français de recherche en Iran, pp. 345-359.

[4]Giddens, A. (1979) 'Central Problems in Social Theory'. Berkeley : University of California Press, p.207, in Azaryahu, M. (1996) 'The power of commemorative street names', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 14. Great Britain : Pion, pp. 311-330.

[5]Azaryahu, M. (1996) 'The power of commemorative street names', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 14. Great Britain: Pion, pp. 311-330.

[6]Ibid.,p. 321.

[7]Ibid., p.328.

[8]Wood. D. (2006) 'Map Art', Cartographic Perspectives, n°53:10, in Harmon, K. and Clemans, G. (2009) *The Map As Art Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press. p. 13.

A nation state cannot be built without identifying with a history, real or invented. In fact, it is the feeling, the awareness of sharing a common past within a defined territory, that along with other building blocks, allows a state to assert itself as a nation. The traces, often selective, as are for example the commemorative street names in Iran, appear on the official maps. By making visible the borders' delineation which are key elements of what states commonly call 'national security policy', these maps define the spatial boundaries of the homogenisation policies and show the limits of each state's historical memory which, for one people, is different according to the side of the border. Maps also create a link that is dynamic but unstable, with memory and space.

The map is a schematic representation of space. Its function is to indicate precisely the boundaries and the extent of a space in particular, and it is also in relation to space that a part of our memory takes shape.[9] Memory is related both to space and to the past ; it is something we realise when, for example, we are in a place, and we remember the appearance it had in the past, or the objects that used to be there. This relation also holds if we think about the memorialization practices as the building of memory places or commemorations. The relation we have today with space is partly influenced by the experiences we had in it.

Maps are like icons showing on a small scale, how space was organised and shared inside the urban frame. The French geographer Guy Di Meo wrote that 'the map symbolizes the geographical space, sometimes the territory ... It creates the territory as much as it shows its space'.[10] The map is the tool of representation of space. As the British map historian, Brian Harley says, it 'introduced a discipline of space'.[11] According to Di Meo, the map fulfils a function of social communication between people and space. He says that the map arranges spaces in a synoptic way and breaks the sequential linearity of concrete practices of space. It gives a material base to the narratives and to the discourses related to the space. It associates

places, that by nature are separated and distinct, in one visual context of the illusion of the unique. It gives them, in this way, a common destiny and meaning.[12]

The map cannot account for the multi-layered memories of space, but it is, one might say, a graphic representation of it. This is why I use it as a creative medium on which I show that, although nothing is left in the space of the memory of political militants, in the memories of these exiles the places of Tehran remained as they were before. My cartography tries to reactivate the amputated memory of this group on the map of Tehran. I use the official map of Tehran as a medium to erect places dedicated to the expelled memories, those that are not represented in any way in the city, and to the memories whose marks were erased from the public space. Indeed, the cartographic image can be redesigned and read, so that what has disappeared and was forgotten returns to memory. This can be called memory cartography. Therefore my work, beside its political significance, can be defined as a 'memory map'. Such maps often reflect the relation that people have with places that have been destroyed or no longer exist.
Thus, as anthropologist Susan Slyomovics explains, these maps that show what the places looked like in the past are 'visual analogues to taped, oral histories about events in the distant past in that they do not reproduce, but rather reconstruct, a world'.[13] It is usually in memoirs or in history books, specifically about the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing of the Germans between 1944 and 1950 and of the Palestinians between 1947 and 1949 that we can find these memory maps, often accompanied by pictures. Memory maps reflect that memory never exists independently of the historical, social, geographical, and cultural contexts. They reveal that the memory of a past event depends on the person who remembers it and on the time, the place, and the circumstances of this recalling. For an artist, mapping memory means listening to ghosts; one's own and also that of others. It means penetrating an inquiry process and be guided by an ever greater curiosity. A memory map is the fruit of a work that requires from the artist who created it to demonstrate creativity.

Two examples of works that could be regarded as artistic memory maps held my attention. One is 'Memory Map – A Topology of Rememberance' created by the Austrian artist Nikolaus Gansterer. He created a paper map of Vienna in order to return to the Viennese victims of Nazism a place in this city where they were brutally expelled from. This map allows to look at this city from the perspective of its former inhabitants who were exterminated.

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[9] I wrote about the question of space as a collective memory framework (memory of a group) as examined by Maurice Halbwachs, in an article I wrote about one of my cartographies entitled 'Mnemonic cartography of violence', *Copy-Past. Revaluating History, Memory and Archive in Cinema, Performing Arts and Visual Culture*, Studia Dramatica, 2/2019, pp.119-128, available at HTTP://STUDIA.UBBCLUJ.RO/DOWNLOAD/PDF/1261.PDF

[10] Di Meo, G. (1998) *Géographie sociale et territoires*. Paris: Nathan, p.183.

[11] Harley, B. (1995) 'Cartes, savoir et pouvoir', in *Le pouvoir des cartes - Brain Harley et la cartographie*, texts compiled by Gould, P. and Bially, A., translated by de Lavergne, P., Paris: ECONOMICA, p. 31.

[12] Di Meo, G. (1998), p. 185.

[13] Slyomovics, S. (1998) *The object of memory:Arab and Jew narrate the Palestinian village*. Philadelphia: University Press of Pensylvania, p. 7.

Copyright with permission of Nikolaus Gansterer

This sculptural 3D mapping of Vienna's memory comprises 38 memory sites in reference to 1938, the year of the Anschluss. The map is composed of parts of archived letters, written by Viennese victims and survivors of the Shoah. The artist has first scanned the letters, cut the texts in strips, keeping the sentences that he assembled in order to create a topographic map of Vienna in 3D. These letters are a direct testimony of the past and encourage the viewer to imagine the lives of those who lived in this city they were deported from.

The format of the map helps to become aware of the intensity of the violence suffered by the Viennese. In connection with this map, a mapping system on smartphone and an application were designed allowing the public to move through these 38 significant places of Vienna that witnessed acts of exclusion, violence, and humiliation between 1938 and 1945.

Thus, Gansterer gave a memory function to this practical tool used now on a daily basis, as a digital map on smartphone. He gave to these 38 places the status of 'memory zone', therefore becoming memory places symbolizing loss and absence.[14] Life in these places was suddenly disrupted to the point of being interrupted, and it is from this moment that these places stopped being what they had been. They represent the memory of various groups, victims of the Nazi regime : the Roma and Sintis, the mentally and physically disabled, the homosexuals, the dissidents (Communists, Socialists and Christian Democrats), the Slovenian partisans, and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

'Memory Map' allows us to discover Vienna by following the spectral trace of its former residents. It is a cartography haunted by the ghosts that can not be shown. That is precisely where the aesthetic challenge of this representation lies : rehabilitate the phantoms, bring an image of the city's past into its present and materialise a loss which, by nature, cannot be imaged. This cartography brings back memories which the Austrian capital had been dispossessed of. There is a willlingness from the artist to visually inscribe the traces of this past on the city's map. He builds an intelligible link between the map and the memory through elements that have remained from the victims of the Nazi regime.

Another example of a mnemonic representation on the map, that resembles on some points Gansterer's work, is the mapping of the German artist Michaela Melian. She brought up the past in the present by creating a mnemonic artistic cartography. Through Memory Loops, her project of virtual memorial for the victims of Nazism, this artist reintroduced the past of Munich by using a map and testimonies of the victims or witnesses of this time who are still alive. It is an audio artistic work that includes 300 tracks of a few minutes in which a story or a music that correlates with different places on the map of Munich can be heard. The website memoryloops.net is the central element of the work and allows the spectator to follow in a virtual way an itinerary, a memory loop through the city.[15]

CONCLUSION

Memory cartography allows an artist to examine an event or a historical period in an alternative manner, to criticize the status quo, and to imagine the future of a place. It brings out the complexity of the experiences lived in the urban spaces, draws somehow the intimate portrait of a city, reveals the hidden side of a historically significant place, or bears witness to the existence of an unknown place. Therefore, showing these places on the official map can contribute to a symbolical return to the city, the memory it has been dispossessed of. I must however point out that there are differences between my works and the two cartographies that I have mentioned, for instance with regard to the nature of the crimes that have been raised. The Nazis' crimes were genocidal while I.R.I's crimes cannot be considered as such. They have, however, similarities: firstly, both are based on the memory of a city's inhabitants in order to show its violent past. Furthermore, in the two works cited above, as in my cartographies, a connection is made between the city's past and the situation in which it is now. Finally, in all these works, the study of the city was conducted by highlighting its lacunas, ambiguities, and its complexities.

[14] Nikolaus Gansterer, *Memory Map* [online], http://www.gansterer.org/Memory-Map/, accessed on 28. 9. 2017.

[15] *Memory Loops throughout the city of Munich*, Michaela Melian [online] Available on http://www.memoryloops.net/de/intro, accessed on 28 .09.2017.

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Website

http://www.memoryloops.net/de/intro,
http://www.gansterer.org/Memory-Map

Table of figures

Fig.1, Fig. 2: Bahar Majdzadeh, Cartography of the absentees, 2019, vinyl tarp, 120cm x 170cm, spread on one or two wooden tables of similar dimensions, with 19 holes to let the loudspeakers cables through.

Fig.3, Fig 4: Nikolaus Gansterer, The Memory Map, 2013, paper, text, pins, on wooden plates, dimensions 200 x 300 x 25 cm, Courtesy Nikolaus Gansterer and Jewish Museum, Vienna