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Topography of the Absence of the Iranian Political Exiles

Bahar Majdzadeh

About thirty years ago, the French writer Patrick Modiano found an ad published in the Paris-Soir newspaper, dated the 31st of December 1941, in which the Bruder Family was looking for their 15 years old daughter, Dora. This ad led Modiano to research the circumstances of this teenager's disappearance, and this quest in Paris constituted his book, entitled *Dora Bruder*. The search for traces of this teenager's life and signs related to her disappearance leads to complex questions, particularly regarding memory in the urban space, oblivion, and the archive policy. It was found that there was no trace left of Dora in the city, or at least it was not easy at all to find some. This difficulty reminds of the Vichy regime's legacy and the will to erase the memory of the collaboration. By adopting as common threads of his novel, the places in Paris, where Dora Bruder has spent time in, the events that took place there under the occupation, and his own memories, Modiano builds through his book a form of topography of a neighborhood in Paris. During the lecture Modiano delivered at the Nobel ceremony in 2014, he spoke about the use of the concept of topography in literary studies:

You can lose yourself or disappear in a big city. You can even change your identity and live a new life. You can indulge in a very long investigation to find a trace of malice, starting only with one or two addresses in an isolated neighborhood. I have always been fascinated by the short note that sometimes appears on search records: last known address. Themes of disappearance, identity, and the passing of time are closely bound up with the topography of cities. That is why since the 19th century, cities have been the territory of novelists, and some of the greatest of them are linked to a single city: Balzac and Paris, Dickens and London, Dostoyevsky and Saint Petersburg, Tokyo and Nagai Kafu, Stockholm and Hjalmar Soderberg.¹



In my visual and sound work «Cartography of the Absentees», which refers to the 1980s decade in Iran, I tried to create, through the map of Tehran, the topography of a memory that is absent from the city. Indeed, In the 1980s, after the 1979 Iranian revolution, a politicide² occurred in Iran that lasted seven years. It is still not clear today exactly how many militants perished, but at least 20 000³ of them died. There are very few official documents mentioning this unknown mass murder, but many testimonies from the families, the survivors, and the political militants have been published, mostly in Persian, outside the country. Following this bloody repression, a huge number⁴ of political activists left Iran. In my artistic mappings «Cartography of the Absentees» [see Fig. 1], I focused on the witnesses of the 1980s politicide in Iran, those who were usually absent from the historical narrative of post-revolutionary Iran. I was more particularly interested in the political exiles who were forced to leave Iran during the 1980s and never returned. They were militants of different political trends who, because of their opposition to the Shah's regime, had participated in the Revolution, and later, because of their hostility towards the new political power and after the repression it ran against them, had no choice but to leave their country if they wanted to stay alive or to continue the political struggle.

As Modiano, my mapping of the absentees, which means the 1980s exiled political militants of Iran, grew out of personal experience. Indeed, in the memories told by my parents, and in their photo albums, there were people whom I knew were not dead, but yet, they were absent. Some places mentioned by my parents when they recalled memories they had of these absent persons, did not exist anymore or had radically changed, but many others were places I had spent time in.

Therefore, these places, that somehow, from a memory point of view, the absentees and I have in common, intersected. Nevertheless, it was almost impossible for me to imagine these persons that I did not know but who I was close to, in these different places. In fact, there was no trace left of their past presence in the city we lived in; everything had changed. The disappearance of everything that could constitute a memory of them made me feel that something was missing, that something had been moved, or affected.

It was through the phone that, for the first time, I had been able to establish contact with these absentees. Many of them started calling us at our home 15 years after leaving Iran, or even 20 years for some of them. From that moment, the family photos and my parents' memories took the form of voices. It was when I heard their voices that, for the first time, these beings that I considered, unconsciously, as living dead, appeared to me as absent beings. The first times they called our home, these voices that I heard seemed to me to be coming from the past; a past they were reactivating with many different emotions. Indeed, I truly experienced the absence of these people. It is this experience of absence that, different from the absence of an object or of a dead person, can broaden the scope of loss. It is possible to explain with words, by evoking political and historical events, the pain of exile, the broken familial ties, and the forced and unwilling absence of those who were expelled and had to leave their lives. However, this absence, as such, is not an object that one could have an image of. When I talk about it, I do not really know what image I rely on to picture it. This absence has no image, and in fact, it can not have one. Indeed, there is no image of these activists' exodus. I have thought about the life they had in the urban space, and I imagined what could have been the last landscape they saw in Tehran, their last address, or the last phone number they had. In my mind, I apprehended them not as disappeared but as absent persons. I imagined where I could find traces of their prior presence in the urban space and how I could make these traces visible again in the city.

The Memory, an Intimate Trace

The need to understand the past of these militants that interconnects today with my own past made me lead an investigation that deals sensitively with the absentees' memory. I can not reconstruct what they have been through, and neither can I recall it, but I can get closer to it by listening to their memories. Indeed, I am trying to find the traces of this past, or, more precisely, the traces of these absentees' lives while it seems that there is no sign left of them in Tehran. However, as Maurice Halbwachs wrote about the traces of the grandparents' time, these traces are slowly fading. *«Let us see if we cannot find a milieu, a state of past thought and sensibility, that has left all the traces necessary for its provisional recreation.»*⁵ He wrote further about these traces of the past: *«The past has left many other traces, occasionally visible, in present-day society. We see it in people's appearance, the look of a place, and even in the unconscious ways of thinking and feeling preserved by certain persons and milieus.»*⁶

These traces of the past, some of which Halbwachs mentioned, like the living-room of the house of a banker in Vienna where he had the impression of being in an 1830s french salon, are, as Gérard Namer said «sensory traces» or «the *Zeitgeist*»⁷, that should be discovered «in those islands of the past so genuine»,⁸ as Halbwachs himself wrote. I found these traces that Halbwachs talked about, in the memories of the absentees and their appearance, their movements, their way of being, of talking, and thinking. Indeed, seemingly, these militants had gotten old, but it seemed they had the same age when, very young, they actively participated in the Revolution. While talking to them, I could feel and rediscover the extraordinary atmosphere of this decade. Indeed, they constitute a «concrete group» as defined by Karl Mannheim in his *theory of generation*; they participate in a common destiny, in a defined historical and social context, and they talk about their experiences similarly.

If we listen to these former militants' stories, beyond the observation that each memory makes us aware of the passage of time, the time difference, and the depth of the time, we realize that these individuals have kept something from that period. We can find in their stories those sensory traces that I mentioned before. These memories, as Paul Ricoeur⁹ wrote when referring to the passage of Halbwachs quoted above, give to the trace an intimate dimension. The trace, more precisely, its quest, its meaning, and its use, constitute a concern that historians and artists interested in the past have in common. However, a distinction should be made regarding the types of traces that each one will try to use. As Ricoeur wrote, the traces on which historians work are written traces and possibly archived.¹⁰ It is the type of trace that will determine the limits of their work. As highlighted by Paul Veyne, for a historian, it is evident that it is not possible to write the history of events about which no trace is left.¹¹

Thus, for me, these sensory traces are also traces of the absence. My cartography of the absentees is a topography of memories that these former militants have of Tehran. I tried to make the ordinary places that have punctuated these militants' lives into places of memory. I asked nineteen exiles to tell me a memory linked to a place in Tehran, and I recorded their voices that I broadcast on the map at the spot each participant indicated to me. I intended 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 have questioned. This map, with its alternative stories, is neither a guided tour nor a history lesson. It offers the possibility to confront other memories than the one approved by the State and wonder what the Other has lived and endured. These voices that I have recorded are entirely anonymous. The absentees are the ones who decide which information about them could be disclosed. In some ways, this anonymity is symbolic; indeed, it is believed that several hundreds of people among the political militants opposed to the Islamic Republic (I.R.I.) had to leave Iran during this decade. Therefore, I consider those who are participating in that project as the representatives of a bigger group.

I am trying to give a brief overview of the memories that were told and of the places mentioned by the participants:

These stories were sometimes disturbing, like the one describing the torture and demonstrating the will to kill the sense of the humanity of a being, to the extent that he prefers to die or comes to think that he deserved to be imprisoned and tortured. There is also the story of a militant of southern Iran who, after having narrowly avoided death by managing to escape the executions of summer 1988¹², walked along the front line of the Iran-Iraq war (1980 – 1988), arrived in Tehran, and finally found refuge in an apartment situated just in front of Tehran University. The person who told me this said to me that while he was hiding in this place, he remembered with deep anguish that ten years before, he had been in front of this same University, where during the Revolution he had participated in political gatherings. I am also thinking about other significant memories that I was told, those of the Revolution; for example the storming of Evin prison¹³, in which the people participated. The person who recounted this was himself imprisoned in that place during Shah's Regime. There is also the story of the organization of the progressive forces' massive demonstration during the first days that followed the victory of the Revolution and the story of the first meeting, after many years, of one of the founding ayatollahs of the I.R.I with his son. The latter had just returned from exile, and his father had just gotten out of Shah's prison. He was a defender of political Islam while his son was not Muslim anymore and had turned towards communism.

The memories told by these absentees are deeply moving, fascinating, traumatizing, and complement each other. These stories convey the emotions, the ideals, and the sufferings of the protagonists of this past. The listener of the map of the absentees will undergo a particular experience and will be confronted with very diverse feelings, sometimes ranging from sorrow to a certain kind of exaltation. Almost all the participants in my project used the former names of the streets of Tehran and said they did not know the names that the I.R.I had given to them. Consequently, I had to find the ancient namings to identify on my map the places of the memories that were told. These are ordinary places of everyday life, places of the family memory such as the house, places of public gatherings such as Enqelab avenue, or, finally, more symbolic places such as the prison. These spaces and places, some of which changed or were destroyed, take on a whole different meaning in the mind of those who hear the stories of the exiles recalling what they have lived through. The place plays a decisive part in the ability of each individual to remember its past, and it is thanks to the memories that we have of the places that we identify with them. Today, it is no longer possible to live in these places the same experiences that these exiles lived more than thirty years ago. It was vital for me to underline this difference in my work. One can say, that somehow, these places are home to the invisible traces of a hidden memory. The location of these memories allow the spectators to situate these places on the map and to give them a meaning they did not have before. These places can be seen as alternative places of an amputated memory, likely to rekindle lost political alterity.

Art and artists played a role in constructing thought regarding political violence in the last century. Rather than developing concepts or producing new theories, my intention through my research project is to question the visible (the use of the map in my artwork) and perceive the invisible. Indeed, searching for the traces of these militants' previous lives in the city brings to light the events during this decade. However, the city hides as much as it shows, but it is essential to turn to it to discover the past. The places mentioned in my work and the stories told contribute in different ways to understand this past, particularly when there is no collective will to remember it. My work creates a temporal passage from a present and sensitive gaze onto the past.

The Time of the Exiles

It was very strange for me, who, like these exiles, now lives far from Tehran, to talk in front of each of them about this city of which we were absent. The narratives of their memories allowed me to imagine them in these places they were talking about. It seems that only exile can make this experience happen.

On the one hand, the I.R.I has always tried to get closer to the Iranian diaspora and has tried to take advantage of its prosperity, whether it was for economic, scientific, or even political reasons, but on the other hand, the I.R.I's relation with its opponents in exile has always been violent. It has taken various forms; the infiltration of the opposition movements' central organs, a hateful rhetoric aiming to turn the political activists into the enemies in the eyes of the Iranian people and to dissuade anyone in Iran from having any kind of relation with them, and finally the assassination of leading figures of the Iranian political and cultural world outside the country.¹⁴ The opposition has always been the target of attacks and threats. It was only after the bloody attack in the Mykonos¹⁵ restaurant in Berlin on 17th of September 1992, followed by a short interruption of diplomatic relations between several European countries and the I.R.I, that the latter put an end to twenty years of targeted assassinations in the West that had claimed the lives of so many political opponents.

Not only had these political opponents been eliminated and annihilated, first inside the country, and in the most violent way, but this eradication campaign was supposed to leave no trace, because it risked questioning the popular and legitimate nature of the regime and reminiscing a recent past, meaning the Revolution, its ideals and its promise of political pluralism. Thus, everything that could recall the former existence of these people and their eradication, should disappear. However, beyond that, the opponents who were still active abroad were, as I wrote earlier, subject to a second elimination. Indeed, the exiles, who are the traces of this suppression, should not be remembered as progressive militants, but rather as annihilated elements who went astray and for which no return was possible. Consequently, exile, as a subjects, had to be erased. The I.R.I has tried, during a very long time, by every possible means it had, to conceal the reality of exile and deny its contemporaneity. This phenomenon of exile that must be lived and felt as a present-day reality has been pushed into an annihilated past.

All of this is to darken the Iranians historical understanding of the Revolution. Interestingly, the Shah called these militants «the subversives».

These absentees, who were banished from the political realm for so long and ignored by the historians, whose voices were stifled, whose legitimacy and right of appearing was denied, see exile as a political stand, as the continuation of a struggle, a resistance, symbolic as it may be, and this, over and above the danger which a trip to their home country would represent for many of them. In the view of the exiles who refused to go back to Iran, exile, that was only supposed to be a transitory stage or a way to continue the political struggle, has represented, over time, what had been annihilated but also what remained of the pluralism of the Revolution's political forces. Indeed, it is an ignored and forgotten image of the 1979 Revolution that these «survivor committees» of the 1980s politicide wanted to save, and this is how they clearly differ from the other Iranian refugees of the following decades.

The exiles are voiceless and unseen, especially in Iran, where over time, it seems they never existed. Silence seals exile. Exile and oblivion are close phenomena. Exile produces a space of lack, of amnesia, and of absence. Silence regarding exiles participates in the policy that aims at making these people leave. Silence and oblivion have driven the society into a kind of blindness, if not, unconsciousness, regarding the exile phenomenon, and this explains why this issue is totally absent from the political and historical discussions in Iran. The exile, while refusing to be silent, must permanently struggle against oblivion. The 1980s Iranian political exiles live in a condensed time, made of immediacy and urgency, in which the past, with all its disasters, is still present. It means that what they lived about 30 years ago is somehow contemporary. There is still no perspective and distance to the painful events of the 1980s. It is a particular type of temporality that is the reflection of this past that does not pass. This time in which the absentees leave has been banished; it has been expelled from the present, it has been forced to exile.

Indeed, the position of some Iranian exiles of the 1980s who accept their refugee status, simply because it is how they see themselves, is closely related to an issue of politico-historical temporality. Hannah Arendt wrote about the German Jewish refugees in the United States: «*History is no longer a closed book to them, and politics is no longer the privilege of the Gentiles.*»¹⁶ Indeed, following Arendt's reasoning, one could affirm that for all the political refugees, history never ends, because the reason that drove them to apply for refugee status originates in the past, and in the specific case of the Iranians of the 1980s, its erasure and destruction continues. For Arendt, the refugee is like the paradigm of a new historical awareness and is at the forefront of its people. Giorgio Agamben (following Arendt's theory), in *Homo Sacer* had suggested reconstructing political philosophy from the unique figure of the refugee; he wrote that this «*marginal figure*» who «*unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, [...] is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time.*»¹⁷ Agamben is interested in the refugee as a figure, but from the angle of its relationship with the

nation-state to which it fled. Inspired by these words, I put the absentees, in other words, the figure of the refugee, in the heart of a quest undertaken on the map, in relation to the nation-state where it has been erased from. Political exile always defines itself in relation to a territory in which the identity, the memory, and the past of the refugee are linked. Putting the absentees on the official map of Tehran discredits the concept of the Islamic nation-state created and imposed after the Revolution. It symbolically puts into question its power; by naming the streets, by destroying some places of remembrance to create new ones, and by hiding the traces of political violence, it tries to reinforce its control over the Iranian territory. These practices of annihilation are not limited to space as such, but establish continuities and relations with, and within, society.

Conclusion

Initially, what should have constituted the visual element of my works, are the public spaces, but faced with the impossibility to access and work there, I turned to the map (their graphical representation). On the authorized map of Tehran, the only visible traces of this era of rebellion and erasure of memory are street names (of the Iran-Iraq war martyrs)¹⁸, but yet, 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, Tehran's official map, designed to serve the authorized history of the current political power, echoes the «obstinate» memories of the 1980s 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 projects, 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.*¹⁹

In my work, this map becomes the object of a reappropriation process of the city. My intention was to deconstruct the vision of political power in order to make visible what it hides. The map allows the artist to intervene, which means to investigate differently, to represent, and to bear witness to the unseen, which can then get 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 artifact.

The particularity of this work that will combine visual and sound arts lies in articulating artistic practice and theoretical thinking from personal experiences, leading to a more general reflection, that, in this instance, is about the representation of mass violence. It is the experiment of a new way of the distribution

of the sensible through art. In my cartography, the past, which means the stories, told memories, intertwine with the present, on today's map. The return (*revenge*) of the absentees in the city, through my map, does not mean the return of history; it represents the fate of the living, a dialectic of return related to the present and not to the past. The revenants, whose existence seems to be unknown to the society, are the traces of repression, of a disease, of an interior pain, from which it suffers. Besides being used as a tool to collect losses, my cartography is a diagnosis of a disease. I have tried, in this topography of the absentees' memories, to make visible the signs of this disease and of this absence, which are not visible in the city. Indeed, the contemporaneity of their absence is not public; it is a hidden and fragile awareness, confined to family circles, friends, and former comrades.

My intent is not to create a new map of Tehran, but it is to, symbolically, make the exiles come back to the city. I have tried to create a new document with the help of the political opponents' memories, rather than repair the map. For those who will listen to the stories of the absentees, part of the city's past will come to light, but there is nothing that my cartography can save or reproduce from the city. The stories that I have put on the map act as landmarks that only allow becoming aware of the absence of their narrators in society. Listening to them can, at best, get the survivors back to visibility, allow finding revenants, and bring up to the surface a layer of the city's memory that its inhabitants are unaware of. At the same time, it can show dysfunction and anomaly in the city.

My work is a research on the present time, this present time in which the scarf of the past still hurts. My map is, therefore, not a reflection of the city's past. I am not trying to produce the image of its past but rather create its image of today by showing this absence. I have looked for what could be called the image of the absence, from the ancient inhabitants of the city, those, whose memory is still accessible today. I send back this memory to the place it had been erased from, which means the public realm. My cartography is a little act of resistance in the face of the map's authoritarian power and could allow initiating a process of reparation that is still quite unimaginable for me.

To conclude, I must say that this work, which from the beginning was tinged with personal feelings and family loss, led to a collective history. Rather than considering art as an individual space of expression for the artist, I consider it as a common space (in the political sense), a space of collective expression. Indeed, this loss exceeds the borders of family history and concerns the whole society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Patrick Modiano – Nobel lecture, 2014, 19: https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/modiano-lecture_en-1.pdf.
- 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. Cf. Harff/Gurr 1988, 359–371.
- 3 In 2007, a people's tribunal (Iran Tribunal) has been established in Europe by survivors of the 1980s wave of assassinations, by former political prisoners, and families of militants executed during this period. Their goal was to see the judgment of these political crimes. Trials have taken place between June 2012 and February 2013, chaired by high-ranking judges of different nationalities who had all, in the past, ruled on mass murders. A truth commission has been set up, and I.R.I have been condemned for crime against humanity and genocide. <http://www.irantribunal.com/index.php/en/about-us/286-set-up-people-tribunal>.
- 4 Even though there is no exact figure of the number of the political refugees who fled Iran in the 1980s, there is no doubt that these absentees are not just a small group of around a hundred persons, but rather a mass of tens of thousands people. To get an idea, the UNHCR estimates that around 187 000 Iranian asylum seekers have been registered in the industrialized countries between 1982 and 1990. Cf. Vahabi 2012, 47.
- 5 Halbwachs 1980, 65.
- 6 Ibid, 66.
- 7 Namer 1987, 101.
- 8 Halbwachs 1980, 66.
- 9 Ricoeur 2003, 515.
- 10 Ibid, 16.
- 11 Veyne 1971, 26.
- 12 In the summer of 1988, when the Iran-Iraq war was almost finished, the Islamic Republic committed a political massacre. They murdered almost all the political prisoners who were still alive at that time all over the country. Within two months, they killed between three and five thousand persons. Cf. Abrahamian 1999, Robertson 2010, Amnesty International 2018.
- 13 Evin is the most notorious prison in Iran. Many political activists and intellectuals have been executed there regularly since 1972.
- 14 The list of the political opponents killed by the I.R. I abroad is long and all the political parties and opponents to the regime are found in here. To give only a few examples, I can mention Shapur Bakhtiari, the last Prime Minister of the Shah of Iran. He was very critical of the Shah's policy, and he was close to the ideas of Mohammad Mossadegh (Iranian Prime Minister between July 1952 and August 1953). He had been a member of the international brigades against Franco, he had entered the French army facing Nazi Germany and has also been a member of the French Resistance. He was assassinated on the 6th of August 1991 in Suresnes. Another figure of the opposition: Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, assassinated on the 13th of July 1989 in Vienna. Fereydon Farokhzad, singer, actor, TV, presenter, and opposed to the I.R.I., was assassinated on the 7th of August 1992 in Bonn, Germany. Kâzem Rajavi, close to the People's Mojahedin of Iran (a group that had combined Islam and communism), was assassinated on the 24th of April 1990 in Coppet, Switzerland, and hundreds of others have also been murdered throughout the world.
- 15 Three Kurdish political leaders (Sâdegh Sharafkandi, Fattah Abdoli, Homâyun Ardalân) and Nuri Dehkordi were assassinated there, three of them are buried in Père Lachaise cemetery. This assassination had the particularity of resulting in the condemnation by the European Union court of the I.R.I., held responsible for the murder.
- 16 Arendt 2007, 274.
- 17 Agamben 2000, 90–95.
- 18 A lot of streets and highways were given names of martyrs of the Iran/Iraq war. Indeed, the war was a unique opportunity for the I.R.I to take possession of the narrowest streets and the widest avenues of the city. Naming streets with war martyrs' names, even if it can be seen as a symbolic reparation for 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 1979 Revolution.
- 19 Denis Wood, Map Art, Cartographic Perspectives: Journal of the North American Cartographic Information Society, n°53 (Winter 2006): 10. Quoted In Harmon, K. / Clemans, G. 2009, p. 13.

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TABLE OF FIGURES

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