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# Cartography as a Possible Support of Representation

Bahar Majdzadeh

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Babylonia Constantinides / Simon Gröger / Elisa Leroy / Doris Rebhan (eds)

Change Through Repetition  
Mimesis as a Transformative Principle Between Art and Politics





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Elisa Leroy / Doris Rebhan (eds)

# Change Through Repetition

Mimesis as a Transformative Principle  
Between Art and Politics

Special Print

Neofelis Verlag

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Bahar Majdzadeh

## Cartography as a Possible Support of Representation

### Tracing the Spectrality of Khàvaràn, Iran

#### Introduction

In the 1980s, right after the 1979 Revolution,<sup>1</sup> a politicide<sup>2</sup> occurred in Iran that lasted seven years. It is still not clear today exactly how many political activists perished, but it is fair to say that at least 20,000 of them died.<sup>3</sup> They were made up of different political groups that had participated in the Revolution. A majority of them were sympathizers of leftist groups or of the People's Mojàhedín Organisation of Iran (PMOI), whose ideology combined Islam with communism. Indeed, the revolution generated much enthusiasm among the young generation of the 1970s in Iran, who wanted to get involved in politics in their country. Very soon, however, they were faced with the dictatorial methods used by the new regime. In fact, the summer of 1981 is the period in which the supporters

1 The 1979 Iranian Revolution was a popular uprising that lasted 18 months and put an end to the monarchy. The protest movement comprised secular and religious people. It paved the way for the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

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. Barbara Harff / Ted Robert Gurr: *Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides, Identification and Measurement of Cases Since 1945*. In: *International Studies Quarterly* 32:3 (1988), pp. 359–371.

3 In 2007, a people's tribunal (Iran Tribunal) was established in Europe by survivors of the 1980s wave of assassinations, former political prisoners, and families of militants executed during this period. Their goal was to see the judgement 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 was set up and the IRI was condemned for crimes against humanity and genocide. Cf. <http://www.irantribunal.com/index.php/en/about-us/286-set-up-people-tribunal> (accessed: January 22, 2020).

of the IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran) succeeded in monopolizing the executive, legislative, and juridical power and which can be considered as the starting point of the politicide. The last step of the 1980s politicide was the massacre of political prisoners that occurred around July 25, 1988, one week after Iran accepted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 (S/RES/589) that put an end to the eight-year war against Iraq. In summer 1988, for two months, more than 4,000 political prisoners were executed in silence throughout the whole country. Most of these political prisoners had been sentenced to several years of imprisonment in summary trials in the early or mid-1980s, but in summer 1988, they were facing committees in each prison all over Iran. Those committees were composed of three people that were presented to the prisoners as amnesty committees. Later, the survivors of the massacre renamed them the death committees. The militants were only asked a few questions that slightly varied depending on their political affiliations. They did not know the potentially fatal consequences of their answers and did not realize the real purpose of these committees. There are very few official documents mentioning this unknown mass murder, but a lot of testimonies from the survivors and the families were published, mostly in Persian, outside the country, and several human rights reports as well as many online articles<sup>4</sup>.

The corpses of these political activists were never returned to their families, who were forbidden to organize mourning ceremonies. The impossibility of mourning as a result of the absence of the corpses and the political pressure have kept the executed militants in a form of invisibility. There are many ceremonies in Iran in honor of the dead and this is how they leave the world of the living in several drawn-out steps. First comes the burial, then the ceremonies called “Third” (three days after the death), “Seventh”, and “Fortieth”, then the first New Year’s Day (Nowruz, the Iranian new year, the first day of spring) that comes after the death, and finally the first anniversary of the deceased’s passing. The door of the deceased’s home remains open for seven days so that people can visit the family. Flowers are put down the door with the name and the picture of the deceased. These ceremonies are the reflection of the balance Iranians maintain between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The mourning ceremonies in

4 For further reading, cf. Ervand Abrahamian: *Tortured Confessions. Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*. Berkeley / Los Angeles: California UP 1999; Geoffrey Robertson: *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988*. Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation 2010. [https://www.iranrights.org/attachments/library/doc\\_118.pdf](https://www.iranrights.org/attachments/library/doc_118.pdf) (accessed: February 25, 2019); Amnesty International: Iran: Blood-Soaked Secrets. Why Iran’s 1988 Prison Massacres Are Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity. In: *Amnesty International*, December 4, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/> (accessed: March 6, 2019).



fact help to make the deceased person visible in the friends' and relatives' lives. They help the family and society to remember them. The cemeteries in Iran are therefore places of gatherings. The absence of a grave in the case of many executed militants of summer 1988 and the fact that their corpses were buried in common graves in zones remote from city centers in Iran, prevented the continuity of life after death that is comprehended in Iranian thought and social practices around death. The fact that they were killed without leaving a trace made them invisible.

Until a few years ago, this massacre was a taboo in Iran and it still is the subject of silence and denial today. The memory of this massacre was excluded from the public realm of the Iranian society. This repression was excluded from discourse, whether artistic, philosophical, or literary. It is the impact of this act of political destruction on the political and social body of Iran that justifies the need for its representation. The representation of the disappearance of the 1980s political militants from today's public spaces of Tehran (a disappearance that I view as having the power of spectrality) constitutes the heart of my cartography. This disappearance is a radical overthrow of the Iranians political experience. It is an (anti-)event: an event that is still not external to us, to our present time, the time of the phantoms. Spectrality implies a time structure, and both haunting and return, what one might call 'revenance', are elements of its mode of operation. Phantoms constantly come back and haunt the living. As an artist-researcher, it is this unease in the present time generated by the coexistence with these phantoms, excluded from political life, that I wish to consider. The following question therefore arises: How can an element be represented if any sign of it has already been erased from the public sphere? This contains the question about whether art can serve as a kind of vessel or provide a space for the abstract spectrality of the present time by collecting the different traces of this disappearance. In the face of the invisibility phenomenon, the question which must be answered is: How can art make this phenomenon visible? To put it in Jacques Rancière's terms: Can art make visible what cannot be seen, what is under the visible, an invisible that brings the visible to light?<sup>5</sup> How can what the murderer made disappear and keeps hidden be shown? How can art help the invisible rise to the surface of inscription so that it remains? Invisibility is not a primary state of being, but something that is strategically effected. The painter Paul Klee claims that "Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern Kunst macht sichtbar."<sup>6</sup> In this context,

5 Cf. Jacques Rancière: *Figures de l'histoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2012, p. 66.

6 "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible." (Paul Klee: *Schöpferische Konfession*. In: P. K.: *Schriften. Rezensionen und Aufsätze*, ed. by Christian Geelhaar. Cologne: DuMont 1997, p. 118, my translation.)

mimesis can be regarded as a kind of reflexive uncovering, for the traces of invisibility point back to the strategies of making invisible.

The search for a trace of the traceless in the public spaces of today is the main element of my artistic representation of the 1980s politicide in the *Cartography of the Invisibles*. The trace that I found in the collective memory of the families of the executed militants is a movement between past and present, because, the memory of any group keeps track of the past traces. They are still visible in its social and psychological present life. There is no ruin left, nor any remnant of the political destruction of the 1980s in Iran, the only imperceptible traces are scattered throughout the country. Whenever, thanks to the investigations of the families, these traces are made visible, they are immediately in danger of being erased. I asked myself about the lasting nature (as opposed to ephemeral) and about the perceptible nature (as opposed to imperceptible) of the actions taken by the families trying to reveal physical traces. At the same time, I was interested in the role and in the influence of art on the durability and on the perceptibility of these actions, for the purpose of testifying to the trace.

My artwork bears witness to the physical and mental traces that interlock in a place called Khàvaràn. In the face of continuous violence which aims at concealing the marks of the crime and manifests itself by the erasure of the traces that remained despite previous dissimulation, the transformation of these traces into visual elements in my work offers a possibility of representing that which has been made invisible. In fact, I designed a mimetic cartography of the repetitive acts of the families in Khàvaràn. The work is related to the meaning of the word *bàzmàndeh* (بازمانده), which designates a close relative of a deceased person in Persian. It means the ‘outliver’. I will first address my theoretical background work, i. e. the explanation of the concept of *bàzmàndeh* in Persian and the study of the traditions of Khàvaràn, such as gatherings and photographs repeatedly taken there throughout over almost four decades by the families. I will conclude with an introduction into my artistic work, which is the *Cartography of the Invisibles*.

## 1. A tradition of gathering

In Persian, the word ‘*bàzmàndeh*’<sup>7</sup> is used to refer to a member of the family of a deceased person. *Bàzmàndeh* comes from the verb ‘*bàzmàndan*’ (بازماندن), which means “to be left of”: it designates the remaining of something, of a place;

7 The word *bàzmàndeh* is also used to refer to a survivor of a natural disaster or of an episode of political violence.

remaining as a memory. The verb has very different meanings in the Persian language, but the one that is discussed here relates to persons who remain as a memory of someone after its death. The *bāzmāndeh*, consequently, is the person who, after the death of a close friend or relative, constitutes, in the eyes of others, a memory of that deceased person. It means that it is possible to see the deceased person through its children and its close friends and relatives. The ‘*bāzmāndegān*’ (بازماندگان), *ān* (ان) and *hā* (ها) being the endings of the plural in Persian, are what remains of the dead person; in other words, there is something of the dead person that is kept, or preserved, in its relatives that are still alive. Therefore, the *bāzmāndegān* of the 1980s executed militants, constitute the memories of those departed political activists for the others, the memories of those departed political activists. They are the traces remaining of them.

The main question arising for the families of any victim of a mass murder is the question of *survivance*.<sup>8</sup> How to live after the catastrophe? How is it possible to stay connected with the executed beloved of whom no trace remains? How to rebuild oneself an identity in their absence while the torturer just simply destroyed it? How to deal with the legacy of this non-ordinary death? How to manage the unspeakable and, finally, how to keep on existing after the event? These are some of the many challenges that the descendants must overcome. *Survivance* can be considered as one of the most elementary and fundamental questions of mankind. One must distinguish between the fight for *survivance* and the fight for survival. *Survivance* raises the issue of continuation and this is how the question of what has to be done with what precedes us, what is prior to us, becomes essential. Speech and writing can be considered as the first steps towards a relief and for escaping oblivion. They offer the opportunity to live among other living and to regain a place in the human community. These two acts of *survivance* can also allow the families to reclaim for their beloved ones, the human space that the murderer confiscated. Finally, as Janine Altounian defines, *survivance* is an unconscious strategy that the families of the crime victims adopt in order to be able to live among the living.<sup>9</sup>

The assurance that something will outlive us when we die explains the natural desire of mankind to reproduce and can partly find its explanation in the concept of *survivance*. It is maybe the reason why, in Iranian thought, the use of the word *bāzmāndegān* to refer to the family members of a deceased person is part

8 *Survivance* is a French term. The question of *survivance* comes up after the disaster and relates to the possibility of continuing living long after the catastrophe. It differs from *survival* which relates to the possibility of staying alive during the catastrophe.

9 Cf. Janine Altounian: *La survivance, traduire le trauma collectif*. Paris: Dunod 2000, p. 1.

of such strategies of *survivance*. But how to ‘survive’ in Iran after 1988, while those in power do not leave any space of expression for the families? Beyond the opponent’s destruction, state violence also involves attacks on all the political, affective, and emotional ties that people could bond, or continue to maintain with the executed militants even after their death; the destruction of the political opponent is total. The different techniques used by the regime, that is the prohibition of funerals in official cemeteries, the obligation to keep quiet, ignorance, negationism (that is the negation and falsification of history), etc., prevent any chance of *survivance* for the heirs of the dark 1980s decade and especially for the families of the summer 1988 massacre. Collective murders and a suffering endured in solitude are the reality of what those in power imposed on the families of the 1980s executed militants. However, the families of Khàvaràn freed themselves from the rule dictated by the Iranian regime. They rose up against the conditions in which they were silenced. Despite the circumstances, they tried to ensure their *survivance* by finding the strength to organize collective ceremonies, both for easing their pain and for reaffirming the collective nature of the massacre. This is how Khàvaràn has become the place of visibility of a repetitive collective practice.

Khàvaràn is a piece of dry land situated next to the Armenian and Hindu cemetery and about 25 km southeast of central Tehran. The IRI calls this place the ‘the land of the damned’ (*la’nat àbàd* لعنت آباد in Persian). The families call it “Khàvaràn, the field of flowers” or just Khàvaràn. This is the place where the regime buried the corpses of the left-wing activists of the 1980s that they had executed in Tehran area. The executed political activists were considered non-Muslims by the IRI, therefore not admissible in public cemeteries. A few members of the *Mojàhedin-e Khalq*’s militants (considered Muslim by the IRI) have also been buried there. Concerning the executions of the political militants between 1981 and the summer of 1988, the IRI has mostly told the families what part of Khàvaràn the corpses of their relatives were buried in. On several occasions during the summer of 1988, the families of the political prisoners that had just been secretly executed found a number of empty trenches in Khàvaràn, but did not know at that time that a massacre was underway. This is why a few months later, when they became aware of the massacre, they concluded that their relatives had been buried there. Some of the *Mojàhedin* executed in that period were buried in public cemeteries. There has never been a clear rule concerning the management of the corpses. The fact remains that Khàvaràn is, broadly speaking, the place where leftist executed militants are probably buried and the movement of the Khàvaràn’s families is composed of people close to these militants. The regime has never allowed the families to place stones or to grow trees in

Khàvaràn. The IRI threatened on many occasions to destroy this place and it is to be feared that some bones were dug up and transferred elsewhere. In this space, which is neither a cemetery nor solely a group of common graves, the bodies of the militants executed in the summer of 1988 intertwine with those assassinated during the whole decade. This place holds the phantoms of those who were excluded from the political realm.

Two months after the massacre of 1988, the Islamic regime called the families (of both leftist and *Mojahedin* militants) to announce the death of their relatives. The families of the leftist activists of Tehran were not told where their beloved ones had been buried. These families tried to organize and to attend mourning ceremonies in each other's homes. Going to Khàvaràn and organizing collective ceremonies despite the threats and the harassment of the regime was, among other actions, their way of protesting. Families traditionally gather in Khàvaràn twice per year: on the day of the anniversary of the massacre of the leftist activists in 1988, which is the first Friday of August, and the last Friday of the Iranian year, in mid-March. This ritual started in the year of the massacre and was performed every year until 2008 on the same dates, each time under the surveillance of the authorities, who even tried to prevent or at least to minimize these gatherings on several occasions. In 2008, after an attack against Khàvaràn by IRI agents, its gates were locked and blocked up. From that time, those in power have not tolerated any kind of rally in this place. However, at least twice a year, sometimes even on a monthly basis, some family members continue to try to enter Khàvaràn at dawn, in small groups or individually, and place flowers.

The ritualistic repetition of commemorative acts by the families is somehow based on Iranian mourning rituals onto which new practices have been grafted. They gave Khàvaràn a symbolic significance when faced with the vacuum left by the political destruction of the 1980s decade. Despite the obligation to remain silent in the public sphere, these families have nevertheless maintained this tradition all these years, without being sure that their beloved ones were really buried under this ground. Their struggle has modified the purpose of this place that was only doomed to be a *la'nat àbàd*, the land of the damned, among so many others in Iran, and has, thus, represented a true political act in that it literally creates visibility. This place was to undergo the erasure strategy used by the Islamic Republic, as it did in other similar places that remained unknown, places of void, forgotten and abandoned. Khàvaràn, this iconic place that includes a series of political, temporal, and historical symbols is the only space in Iran that keeps preserved the repressed memory of the 1980s politicide. The actions taken by the families, in an unequal battle with the IRI, have, more than the presence of common graves, brought a symbolic aura to this place and made it into a place of alternative memory or as a 'memory space' despite all adversities.

## 2. A tradition of image

It is not clear exactly what has motivated the families of Khàvaràn to take pictures in this place during all these years, in particular during the 1980s when repression was more violent, if not a need for *survivance*. The families started to do so very soon, almost immediately in 1981. We can distinguish two important groups among all these photographs. The first one is composed of photos of the soil, without anything, or with flowers or stones that were placed to form a grave. In the second group, we can find photos that show the members of the bereaved families in different situations; some pictures only show shadows of people, on others we see members of different families posing together, people alone, sometimes with a picture of their beloved ones in their hand, and finally some photos show people seated in a place where they think their relative might be buried. Taking pictures in Khàvaràn is not an easy thing to do because the place is under constant surveillance. These pictures are usually taken furtively and quickly, and therefore they always are of low quality. They are almost the only things that continue to testify to the presence of the families in this place today. (Figs 1 & 2)

These images reveal almost nothing and have no meaning for those who ignore the history of the place and its relationship with the *bàzmàndegàn*. They are an aesthetic, even political, means of representation of the families' movement. In the case of these photos, photography can be read as an event that tries to evoke a past, while it remains blocked in the present and gives the subject of the photo a transpersonal nature. The most eloquent example of this are the photos of the soil of Khàvaràn. While this soil is like any other soil, the only thing that differentiates it is its past, while the photography in Khàvaràn is indeed taking place in the present. These pictures are also political in the sense that they testify to the political process of annihilation of meaning. Here, photography, as François Soulages writes, is not an individual and private adventure, it is a political and public practice.<sup>10</sup> (Figs 3 & 4)

The families of Khàvaràn have left very few written testimonies. In the absence of any possibility of expressing the catastrophe with words, the Khàvaràn's families have used the field of the image. One of the possible explanations refers to a particular relation between verbal expression and iconic expression, the latter somehow substituting for the former. Indeed, a photo is a visual text, shortened and succinct, easily accessible. It has a direct and immediate influence on its viewers. The use of image is a way to share the unshareable experience that by definition cannot be shared, particularly when language is unable to do so, because as

10 Cf. François Soulages: L'ère de l'homme disparu. In: F. S. / Silvia Solas: *L'homme disparu. Photographie & Corps Politiques 9*. Paris: Harmattan 2016, pp. 99–114, here p. 108.





Fig. 1: Khàvaràn, a gathering of the families of the left-wing militants executed during the 1980s, unknown photographer, pictures taken in the mid-2000s.



Fig. 2: Khàvaràn, unknown photographer, unknown date.



Figs 3 & 4: Khàvaràn, unknown photographer, unknown date.



George Didi-Huberman writes: “An image often appears where a word seems to fail; a word often appears where the imagination seems to fail.”<sup>11</sup>

Every photo constitutes in itself a request to be seen by others. At least until the arrival of the internet in Iran at the beginning of the 2000s, there was no hope or opportunity to show these pictures. They could only be seen in family photo albums or shown in private gatherings. The internet, this new public space, became the exhibition place of these images. The online publishing of the images by the families expresses their desire to share the history of Khàvaràn with others. The reproducibility of images in the virtual space, the opportunity to share them, and show them has led to the creation of a collection of pictures of Khàvaràn through the search engines and in the social networks. If today someone types on a search engine “تابستان ۶۷” (“summer of 67”; 1367 in the Iranian calendar corresponds to 1988) or “کشتار زندانیان سیاسی” (massacre of political prisoners) or “خاوران” (Khàvaràn), what will appear is an online collection of pictures that the families took over the past forty years in Khàvaràn.

When the same pictures of the same place are taken, year after year, and shown, the aim is not just to resurrect that place in the period of time during which the photos are being exhibited. Neither does the viewer look at a simple reproduction of these photos, even though they are not so different from one year to another. In that case, what one witnesses is a repetition that, every time it happens, creates a minimal difference with the one that preceded. The repetition never repeats itself identically.<sup>12</sup> In this case, however, what gave rise to a visual tradition of image is, more than the pictures themselves, the repetition of the act of photography over so many years. One can say that the act of photography is mnemonic. It seems that despite the quite low resolution of these photos, which also do not have any intentionally produced aesthetic qualities, this repeated action of photographing this site places these photos in a unique tradition of image that relates the image to the fight against oblivion. Roland Barthes contrasts photography with oblivion in his book *Camera Lucida*. He writes: “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”<sup>13</sup> In Khàvaràn, two phenomena of repetition meet: One, as Barthes said, is inherent in the very nature of any photo, its ability to repeat an event. The second, which consists of the repetitive act of photography during these four successive decades, gave rise to

11 Georges Didi-Huberman: *Images in Spite of All. Four Photographs From Auschwitz*, transl. from the French by Shane B. Lillis. Chicago / London: Chicago UP 2008, p. 26.

12 Cf. Gilles Deleuze: *Difference et répétition*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1968.

13 Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, transl. from the French by Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang 1981, p. 4.

a unique tradition of image that is specific to this context and type of family photography, and that can be considered an ‘alternative’ or a movement to performatively counter the erasure aimed for by the authorities. Indeed, the performance of this repetition constitutes an end in itself. A third repetition phenomenon, the sharing of the photos online, complements the two others. The remarkable capacity of the internet to share data, to access easily, and to reproduce and edit photos anywhere at any time with one click, allows the subject of the photo to be released from its connection with the collective, unmarked grave it is buried in and thereby from oblivion and death. On the internet, photos are reproduced endlessly and can be seen by any person, anytime, anywhere. In this sense, this reality confirms what Barthes said: that the nature of photography is reproduction. The difference in the case of the photos of Khàvaràn is that, with regard to the internet, it is not a matter of mechanical but of virtual reproduction that will not be able to repeat itself existentially. This easy access to images allowed the fight of the families for *survivance* to continue in a limited, figurative way, in the virtual world of the image, and as a surrogate, since it was impossible for them to visit Khàvaràn as a group. These three phenomena of repetition, i. e. the commemorative acts in and outside Khàvaràn, the practice of photography in this place, and the posting of pictures on the internet, potentially allow them to share a marginalized memory with the rest of the society and help initiate a debate that the Iranian regime wanted to prevent, since it would challenge the regime of visibility installed by the political power. Indeed, repetition is the main action against amnesia, political silence, and toward keeping the memory alive.

### **3. The *Cartography of the Invisibles***

My aim in the *Cartography of the Invisibles* was to map the route taken by the *bàzmandegàn* between Tehran and Khàvaràn. It is, indeed, the perpetual and repetitive nature of the families’ comings and goings that woke this place up out of oblivion and showed the absence of memory about the 1980s in the capital city. Repetition, that is the main action taken in Khàvaràn, allows the families to make themselves visibles as *bàzmandeh* (traces) of the ‘Invisibles’ (the executed militants), and to keep, at the same time, Khàvaràn as a trace of crime. These two traces that can be seen on the photos that I have analyzed constitute, through the maps and the collective memory of a group (the families), the visual side of my artwork.

I asked the families<sup>14</sup> to write down a memory about Khàvaràn, and I wanted them to tell me the route they take to get there. I stuck the writings on their itineraries, and this led me to add Khàvaràn to the map of Tehran. Indeed, Khàvaràn is absent from the official maps of Tehran. The mapping of the *bàzmàndegàn* retraces the route that they take between the city (a noisy and hectic place), and Khàvaràn (a place where silence and inertia prevails). This opposition is the reason why I added another element, the noise, fourteen soundtracks of the hub-bub of Tehran,<sup>15</sup> to this map, the aim of which is to show the movement from one place to the other in sound. The sounds of the city allow us, better than a map, to imagine and to picture a city, a place in constant motion. Indeed, geographically, Khàvaràn is close to Tehran, but is temporally far from it in terms of travelling through time. This place is full of a sense of the emergency of the past, while the capital is empty of it. This is precisely what the sounds of the city highlight. (Figs 5 & 6)

In my cartography, which questions a collective memory (as defined by Maurice Halbwachs), the eye of the artist turns to the present, not by changing it and putting it in a new relation with the past, but by concentrating on what remains from the past in the present. The collective memory keeps a significant print of the past, which means, a certain type of presence of an absence. It constantly revives the remains of the past, which can allow an artwork to go beyond the game of the representation's forms and to proceed to create an aesthetic representation. Indeed, the past continuously reorganizes itself according to changes that occur in the present, and it is this relation that I am interested in. Halbwachs says: "The memory is, to a very large extent, a reconstruction of the past, with the aid of elements borrowed from the present."<sup>16</sup> In fact, a collective memory does not retain the past, but it builds it thanks to the traditions and customs that have survived over time and whose traces remain in the present life of the group. Memory, that seems to be an individual and intimate phenomenon, yet stems from a collective construction. Halbwachs considers it as a language, a production, a social phenomenon. In order to imagine the past, individuals need others. Those who make the remembrance possible could be, for example, the

14 Around ten people who I personally knew participated in my project. The interviews were held online. It took almost a year to gather all the texts.

15 Excerpts are available to listen to at: <https://soundcloud.com/bahar-majdzadeh/le-brouhaha-de-teheran01/s-Lwz0y> and <https://soundcloud.com/bahar-majdzadeh/le-brouhaha-de-teheran-02/s-XeMmX> (accessed: September 18, 2020).

16 Maurice Halbwachs: *Collective Memory*, transl. from the French by Francis J. Ditter / Vida Yazdi Ditter. New York: Harper & Row 1980, p. 69.

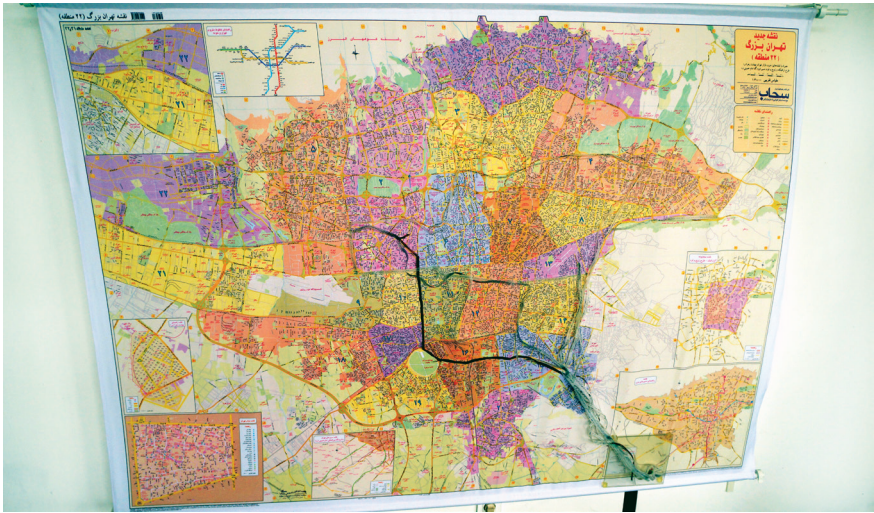


Fig. 5: Bahar Majdzadeh: *The Map of the Invisibles*, 2019, 200 cm x 145 cm, fabric, plexiglas, and tracing paper; the map of Khàvaràn printed on a glass (18 cm x 20 cm), slightly higher than the rest of the map.

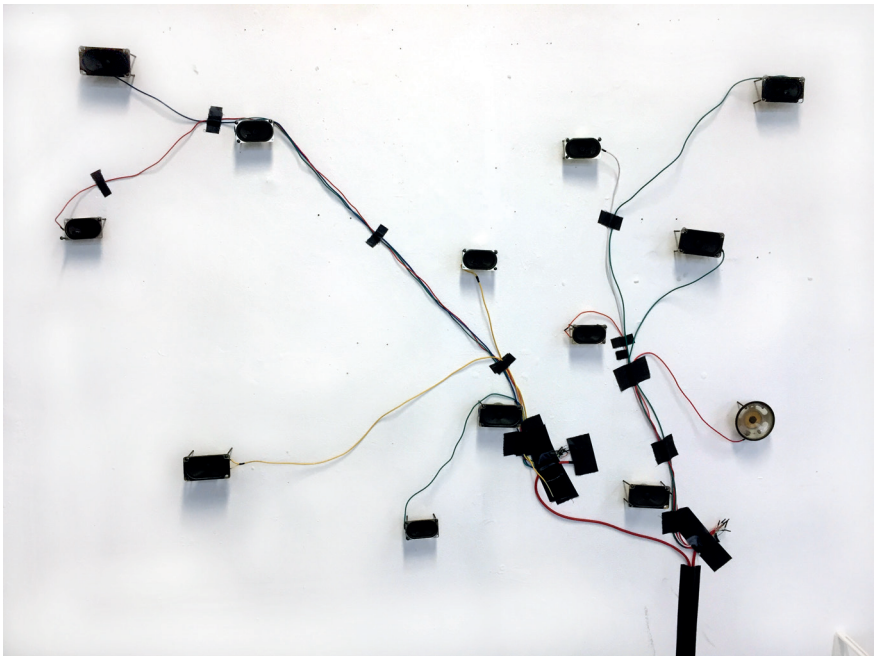


Fig. 6: Bahar Majdzadeh: Diagram of the 14 loudspeakers fixed behind the map broadcasting the hubbub of Tehran on low volume, 2019.





Fig. 7: Bahar Majdzadeh: *Detailed Map of the Invisibles*, 2019.

close friends and relatives. The past is not entirely kept in the individual memory, which only retains impressions, fragments, images that cannot alone constitute the whole memory. Collective representations constitute the memory of the event. Halbwachs does not totally reject the concept of individual memory. The collective memory, as he writes, covers the individual memories, but must not be confused with them.<sup>17</sup> It is the lived memory of a social group, a society. Each group has a memory and its length is limited to the group's lifetime. (Fig. 7)

Art can be a place of refuge for a collective memory of a political nature. By integrating it into an aesthetic framework, one perceivable with the senses, the artist becomes a transmitter of this memory and gives a new visibility to the symptoms of the psychosocial trauma. The use of this concept in my artwork enables a representation of what has been made invisible and allows a space of appearance to be produced within a sensory space for the executed militants. The *bàzmànde-gàn* bring the militants' memory into the center of the urban space, where those in power had expelled them from. They bring with them the phantoms of Khàvaràn every time they go back to the city and leave behind them, all along the way, a trace of the specter. The comings and goings of the families to Khàvaràn have, in a way, moved this forgotten place closer to Tehran, which, from a temporal point of view, it had been moved away from.

17 Cf. Maurice Halbwachs: *La mémoire collective*. Paris: Albin Michel 1997, p. 98.

## Conclusion

Rather than showing an accurate representational picture of the 1980s political militants' disappearance from public spaces, the map, as an image of the space, plays the role of surface of appearance, tool, and media of representation. In my cartography, I try to reveal what had been taken, confiscated from the eyes, what is absent and exists no more. I have sought, throughout this project, the relation between the trace, the repetition, the event, and a possible writing surface, and although my work definitely has a memory feature, it cannot be understood without accounting for its political dimension. The trace that I found in the collective memory of the people I interviewed should, in one way or another, be inscribed (in the field of art). It means that a presence is shown by an absence. When the participants of my map tell me their memories in connection with Khàvaràn, this space acts as a memory framework. However, when this space is precisely defined in my artwork, through the stories of the participants, then it becomes a space of appearing, in the political sense. These political militants, after the revolution and before they were repressed, were active in public spheres. The IRI erased them from there and sent their corpses to remote places, at the outskirts of the cities. Faced with the impossibility of creating an artwork in situ in relation to this politicicide, in public places in Iran, I decided to use the map of Tehran as the iconic representation of the public sphere. I searched for the remains of these militants in the memories of their families in order to bring them back into the public sphere.

To conclude, when we try to give visibility to the specters of the past, to the losers of history, to the 1980s political militants, we must also recognize the deficiency of these attempts. However, an artwork can never be the tomb of those defeated or even initiate replacing their mourning, which has remained forbidden for so long. Such work can at best make the eyes sensitive and produce a type of writing surface for these phantoms. Indeed, when an artistic work aims at producing political or memory images that would make phantoms appear, it should open to a temporality of 'afterwardsness', and so, open to history.

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