



**INSCRIPTION AND
TRANSCRIPTION:
SOME NOTES ON THE LIMINAL**

PETER CROSS |

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“An anthropological term used in rites of passage, ‘liminal’ is defined as a transitional time or condition in which one ... is not what it was and not what it will become, but something in between, something marginal, vague, and flexible ... One’s sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation, but also the possibility of new perspectives. Indeed, ... it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny for the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs—one where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are undone.”
The Rites of Passage, Arnold van Gennep.

Foreword: A Resistance to Categorisation

Three artists, with three different relationships to Iran. All three work across long distances, absences, wide cultural differences and issues of identification. For all three artists, their relationship to Iran is passionate, complex, problematic and ambivalent, and is a basic generative influence in their work. As in every history of difference, each individual discourse is unique. And it goes without saying that these discourses are part of something much wider: the evolution of Iranian contemporary art, nationally and also globally.

Jörg Ahrnt is a German artist who has been travelling to Iran continuously for ten years. Based in Frankfurt am Main, his family is partly in Germany, partly in Iran. Nooshin Farhid is an Iranian artist living in London. With German and Iranian parents, Michael Hakimi is an artist who has lived in both countries, travelling frequently between them, as a child and as an adult, and is based now in Berlin.

The three artists are nearly the same generation, therefore with different experiences of the same period in history: Iranian, European, world history. But beyond that, nothing connects these artists except the disjointed,

fractured nature of their relationships, both to the cultures they live in, and the ones they come from.

Between them, they have mapped out an area which resists cartography. They refuse easy or useful categorisation (useful, I mean, for the cultural agencies that label works of art for easy packaging and consumption) and have chosen instead a more ambivalent territory. They want to keep the discourse open. They are outside the politics of location, the recognition that one location is the site of their aesthetics or politics. But nevertheless, Iran is a place that lives in them, a political, cultural and physical reality somewhere in their individual maps of experience, memory and future.

Example 1. Jörg Ahrnt. Escape In Order to Return.

Jörg Ahrnt takes photographs of Iran as it is now. He photographs districts in Teheran that are indistinguishable from middle class Los Angeles or Sao Paulo; traditional herds of sheep drinking in dwindling river beds full of plastic litter; prayer rooms at motorway service stations; mullahs on intercontinental airplanes.

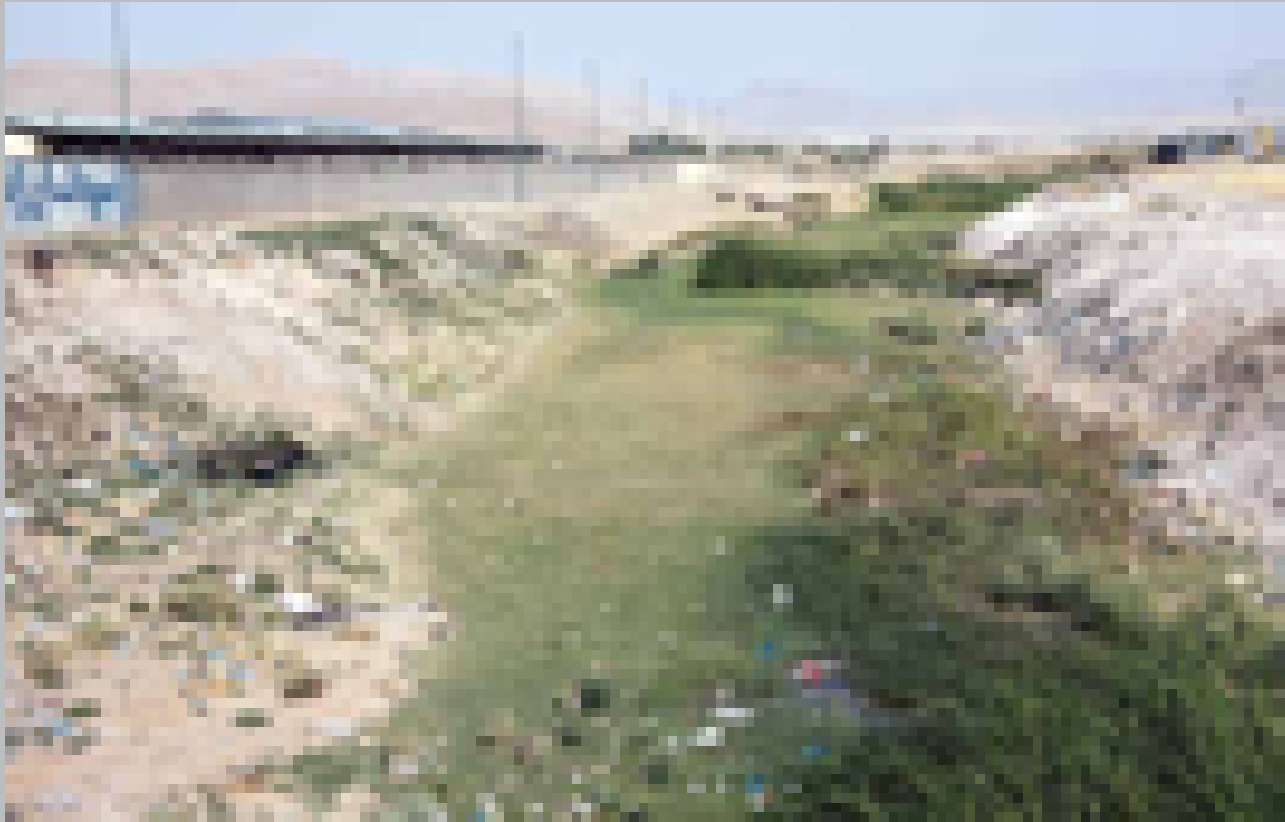
There are two kinds of nomads in his photographs. The last nomadic groups that still travel south west from Luristan and the border with Azerbaijan, but with difficulty: privatised public space, the rules of the new capitalism, oil refineries, enforced settlement laws, ecological disaster, all making their ancient way of life impossible and now almost extinct in modern Iran. And the travelers on the luxury modern buses, travelling between cities in air conditioned comfort, behind curtains, watching TV dramas or sleeping for long hours. These modern nomads stop at service stations equipped with rest areas, automatic massage armchairs, fast food, where video monitors play films of dolphins playing, icebergs floating in blue seas; loudspeakers blast out pop music.

And he photographs dried up river beds. The disappearing rivers of Iran once inspired its poets and fed Iran’s supreme traditional aesthetic metaphor, the garden. Builders take the stones on the old river beds, which are tuned into car parks, or forgotten. They represent, or illustrate, the ecological catastrophe of modern Iran, a disaster that is, as everywhere, ignored, forgotten or denied.

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8- Michael Hakimi, *Koordinaten or Above the Fold* (2007), installation, newsprint, spray-paint, 275×275×275 cm, Michael Krom Gallery, Berlin.

۸- میشل حکیمی، مختصات یا بالای تا (۱۳۸۶)، چیدمان، روزنامه و اسپری رنگ، ۲۷۵×۲۷۵×۲۷۵ سانتی‌متر، گالری میشل کروم، برلین.



Ahrnt's other major area of practice is drawing. His untitled ink drawings are like repeated motifs, musical riffs played repeatedly with minor variations, a shimmering, vibrating movement across the surface of the paper. Breaks in the movement of brush on paper produce another element, which could be moments of interruption, or reflected light. These non-marks, a negation of movement, a sequence of repeated empty spaces, make another level of retinal activity on the surface of the drawing that leads us across the image, looking for a resting place, until we move back and let it work visually as a field of energy. The drawings are highly abstract, almost like musical notations or seismographic scrolls. They could be representations of water, the idea of the water that no longer passes down empty river beds. The abstracted, ornamental quality of the drawings, their refusal of any framed or narrative space, their non-specific references to energy and natural life, not to mention notation, all link Arnt's practice to Persian culture.

Ahrnt has placed another work in the mix, an unattributed, undated anonymous ink and water colour work on paper that comes from Iran or central Asia, probably in the 14th century. The drawing came to Berlin in the 18th century in the possession of the Prussian Ambassador to Constantinople, Heinrich Friedrich von Diez. It seems to show a Chinese form, used for a sophisticated Persian aesthetic: a "Chinese" river flowing

1- Jörg Ahrnt, *A Riverbed in Lorestan* (2009), photograph.

۱- یورک آرنٹ، رودخانه‌ای در لرستان (۲۰۰۹)، عکس.

through a "Persian" landscape. When the Jörg Ahrnt found this drawing in Berlin in 2005, it spoke to him clearly about the mutability of styles, the *line of flight* or *detritorialisation*¹ according to which forms, definitions and bodies can change in nature and connect with other formal languages elsewhere. For the artist, this was like a message. The drawing was evidence that his own practice was nothing new; mutation, multiplicity, difference works across cultures and time.

Any style, any visual language, like any other form of communication, is made up of connections. The moment of identification for a style—whatever was "Chinese" about the river forms in the 14th century drawing—enables it to speak, to exist as a cultural form. But any connection also enables a line of flight; there can always be a genetic mutation. Along the Silk Road that connected China to Europe in the 14th century, this drawing incorporates the stylistic mutations of the journey.

For Jörg Ahrnt, Iran presents a disjuncture and an opportunity. A tradition that is radically different from the one he was educated in offers the artist new points

of departure and new connections. Any journey he makes there is also, always, a journey back into himself.

Example 2. Nooshin Farhid. Reconstruction, Point of Recognition.

Nooshin Farhid's videos are dystopian hallucinations. Resisting narrative, they take the viewer immediately into a world which is simultaneously familiar and uncanny. They are fragmentary, dreamlike, beyond easy interpretation. They have the incomprehensible logic of an unknown language. Like the great modernist photo-collagists Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield but above all Hannah Hoch, Farhid uses found film footage which she combines with her own material to construct, or "reconstruct", as the artist puts it, cinematic space. She edits out the normal boundaries of narrative, to create new dimensions, levels of meaning, connections and combinations, with (sometimes dark) humour and calm, detached decorum. Farhid has developed a finely tuned awareness of the inherent strangeness of the medium of film itself, when it is released from the support of narrative and meaning.

Farhid arrived in London from Iran, a violent transition in which she lost and then had to rebuild language, identity and culture in alien surroundings. The sense of marginalisation and strangeness, a lack of a specific social position, a highly sensitive political awareness, so strongly felt in her work, is based directly on her own experience.

Farhid's work as a collagist—using her own film as well as found material—stays close to the directly human element in film, the element of the human "trace" that film shares with photography. She blends the various languages of film, such as cartoons, the documentary, the interview, cinema verité, reality TV, to produce non-sense that has lost its usual infrastructure of meaning. Found footage blends invisibly with her own film. Sound and colour are central: layers of sound, carefully edited, claim our attention or throb unconsciously in the background; colour, sharply defining mood, sometimes abstract, lush and lyrical, sometimes as bland as a tired surveillance video in a grocery shop.

In *Cross Cross*, 2009, several thematic strands are simultaneously developed and subverted through the 7 minute 30 second film, a relatively short work for the artist. They are woven together in a way that subtly seduces the viewer—there must be a narrative here for me, even if it is based on my own projections onto this material—while at the same time, claiming the ultimate meaning for the artist alone.

Cross Cross begins with a shot of a parked car at night, filmed through a strong red filter, reverberating with the sound of crickets singing (under which you can just hear heavy breathing). With a few quick cinematic tropes we are pulled instantly into a dizzying sequence of material. Who is the person quickly leaving the car, who are the men moving round the room to the sound of a tolling bell? An interior space, a car space, seems to be opened up in the narrative, possibly, but never explicitly, as a male "frame" for the giggling, sexualised, girlish female voice/presence. Farhid throws us into a powerfully emotional, closed, night time world.

The dry red heat of the opening sequence is quickly threatened by thunder and then heavy rain. Quickly the rain becomes a torrential flood, cars sink below the water surface, people drown, or cling to safety in the deluge. The helicopter, present throughout the film, transforms from surveillance to rescue vehicle. We have moved from paranoia to panic. A final moment reveals the female presence dissolving, sinking, somehow, also into blackness. End. *Cross Cross* is "reconstructed" from BBC

2- Jörg Ahrnt, *Like Flowing Water* (2009),
coloured ink on

۲- یورک آرنٹ، چون آب روان (۲۰۰۹)،
جوهر رنگی روی کاغذ، ۵۷×۱۴۷ سانتی متر، عکس از آکس اشنايدر.





3- Nooshin Farhid, *Criss Cross* (2009), still from video.

۳- نوشین فرهید، خطاطی (۱۳۸۸)، تصویری از ویدیو.

News, Paramedics, Sky Cops, Tornados, Maciityre's Big Sting, Volcano, Red Light Lounge.

Farhid is a restless collector in an age of information excess. But to “collect” suggests power, previous knowledge, expertise. Instead the artist's eye is informed by marginalisation rather than any system of knowledge based on control or order. She *induces*, rather than *deduces*, knowledge. Her practice is to work towards, to quote Maria Fusco, *creating or tracing a broader, possibly more fertile environment through close looking, rather than tracking a logical conclusion from the clues given.*²

Farhid's marginality as an active spectator in another culture informs everything she does. A highly sensitive political sensibility informs her new work, *Conic Trilogy*, 2010. Surveillance, policing and subversion are also integrated into earlier pieces. Freed of the usual constraints of class and social identification, she moves freely across British society in a way that could be much more problematic for a national. Her work is set on the margins of that society: in abandoned military installations, in subcultures, groups and communities that are outside the mainstream, at night, in areas outside the boundaries of bourgeois social order.

The liminal space, for Farhid, is one where the material she finds and the filming she does herself, are saturated with an intense, but non-specific atmosphere. The finished work, transformed by the editing process, is never overtly critical. The artist makes a new non narrative with a powerful but latent message, where the behaviorist “triggers” of emotion generate a new kind of experience for the viewer. Each piece, and all her work taken as a whole, consists of rhizomatic³ fragments connecting dynamically, meshing, transforming and overlaying each other.

A new space, and therefore a new political possibility. The culture itself, she feels, is on the point of some fundamental change. She is an astute witness, an active spectator.

Example 3: Michael Hakimi. Coded message, Contained presence

It is 2009, the event is German/Iranian artist Michael Hakimi's exhibition “*Newsblasf*” at the Michael Krome Gallery, Berlin. Hakimi's installation, a “cordoned-off scene of an accident between thought, material and technique”⁴, presents a highly concentrated set of visual messages to the viewer.

The installation is a series of flat or two dimensional works that are freestanding, leaning on the walls or floor based. They work as a group or individually. There is no direct reference to any specific political content, yet all the works contain a sense of modern political violence: message scrambling, censorship or erasure. The work looks like cool product design, mass corporate advertising, hip and media—friendly, but it conceals poisonous ingredients. The pieces have a sign-like quality, but the content of the signs, and the relationship of the viewer to their presentation, is unclear. The colours are black and white, binary opposites, digital YES and NO, ink and paper, the colour of information.

For *B-Fence*, 2009, the artist has painted the Persian/Arabic letter “B” on a two meter high white board which has been cut into fragments: it is the fragmentation that renders the letter illegible to Western eyes, perhaps turning it into some kind of veiled slogan. A possible or imagined meaning, created out of nothing more than the artist's manipulation and the viewer's projection. *Aftermath*, 2009, a large freestanding blackboard with part of the letter “A” has been “shot” through with ornamental “bullet holes”, and walking around it, you see it is just a surface with nothing behind, like a cheap piece of advertising. Placed on the floor, concrete shapes look like (possibly functional) moulds taken from, or for the manufacture of, television satellite dishes. Empty frames stand or lie around, like old slide frames with the photograph removed: erased or censored images.

A work from 2006, *Koordinaten*, (re-titled *Above the Fold* for the Galerie Krome show) places a limit to the installation on several levels. The artist has attached sheets of newspaper to the points where the two walls and the floor of the gallery meet in a corner, and spray painted a “virtual” black line along the real coordinates of the space. The title refers both to the materiality of the newspaper and

its function as a medium. The viewer sees the spray painted lines as stand-ins for the real coordinates. *Koordinaten/Above the Fold* condenses several key obsessions in Hakimi's work: the role of the media in simultaneously revealing reality while hiding it behind ideology; the limits of what can be done in an art space; the artist's own performative gesture, inscribing yet also representing in a world of already defined meanings. As he says: "where is the limit to connoting invisible influences, abstract concepts and assumed contexts, solely through three-dimensional and sculptural representation of the figurative forms associated with them?"⁵

Newsblast and each individual work in the installation reveals an intense engagement with a distant and unnamed place, and its relation to key contemporary issues of media control, and the violence of enforced erasure. Nothing is spoken, but in this exhibition of censorship, nothing is hidden.

Hakimi places his work somewhere between the idea that it started from and the conceptual framework, the "meta-idea" he works with. If the object he makes is a "cordoned off scene of an accident", the collision happens somewhere between the political event and the artist's own performative action. This seems to be something the artist considers very carefully. The audience has several points of entry, to offer personal interpretations of what they see. Many of his installations, such as *Der Große Ofen*, (The Big Oven) 2004, *Navar- e shad* (Happy Tape), 2002, and other works such as *Funky Cold Medina* and the *Straits of Hurmuz*, 2001, relate directly to Iranian youth culture and the role of the media in Iran.

"The motifs and fragments of motifs, that come crashing into the pictorial space here, or seem to stay stuck to the surface there, are treated accordingly—and so one viewer can combine them quite differently to another. ... The intention is again to exist on the threshold, where the motifs take on a form owing to their creative conditions; the intention is to make this moment in time absolutely clear, while nevertheless ensuring the full incisive impact of a picture that affects us by illusion or by the atmospheric and spatial presence it has."⁶

What is liminal here? The artist's own shifting relationship between the two cultures he is part of, which is not a decorative addition to his practice, but a central part of it. The very personal nature of his research, and the way it exists in a liminal, vague and flexible space. A threshold.

Afterword: Dubai airport. In suspension, and in transformation

Most of us experience "transitional time", as a kind of non-time spent either travelling, or between stages of travel. Between Europe and Iran, for example, Dubai airport is a typical transit space, where we wait, immobile for a few hours in a global network of air travel, our social selves on hold.

The liminal space, in which these three artists work, however, is radically different. It is a space where their ideas of the self are in intensive flux and change, but productive change. Iran, a place where they are not, or only partly belong to, or which is not part of their "mother" culture, is always present in their work. Iran is present as a memory, as an absence, as a possibility or an idea. The liminal space is characterised by separation. It is the separation between East and West, low and high culture, between one religious tradition and another, between centre and periphery. But the liminal space is also a space of becoming. Official notions of identity are abandoned; what is forgotten, hidden, illegal or marginal becomes a place to begin work, to begin the process of inscribing a message. ■

Endnotes:

- 1- Deleuze and Guattari, "Chapter 1," *A thousand Plateaus*, 1980.
- 2- Fusco, Maria, *Say who I am.1*, <http://www.recirca.com>. October 2010.
- 3- Deleuze and Guattari, 1980.
- 4- Hakimi, Michael, Unpublished notes, quoted in: Kempkes, Anke, *Black Palms: Signs of the Times in Michael Hakimi's Pictures and Installations*, *Ars Viva* 04/05 – Zeit, catalogue, Kulturkreis der deutschen Wirtschaft, BDI e.V., 2005.
- 5- *ibid.*
- 6- *ibid.*

4- Nooshin Farhid, *Criss Cross* (2009), still from video.

۴- نوشین فرهید، خطاطی (۱۳۸۸)، تصویری از ویدیو.

