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Sheida Soleimani interview transcript: Possibilities of an ethical photographic practice.

We are here today to talk about photography and how it intersects with power. But I'm also interested in what an ethical photographic practice looks like. I wanted to start by asking, you are a teacher and activist as well as an artist. How do you identify with the term photographer and how do you think those practices intersect?

The institutions idea of photography is defining photography through a male-dominated lens and the idea of photography as just a documentary practice, the idea that photography only exists because of a traditional camera. In a sense I really think of traditional lens-based photography as this dominant, overly masculine act of penetrating the world and then documentary photography or New Topographics, or any style of traditional photography becomes a chauvinist kind of act. So my idea of identifying with photography is instead of thinking about the camera as phallus penetrating the world, I kind of think about constructing a field of vision for my lens.

I think that also exists in any academic interests or activist interests I have too. Whatever worlds we exist in, we decide to curate our field of vision. And so when it comes to teaching, I curate my field of vision based off of my interests and what I want to teach and the same goes for issues that are important to me and that I fight for. I guess they all kind of come together on that level, trying to figure out what is in your field of vision, or your lens or view.

Maybe we'll move onto the next question, which is about your practice again. What motivates you to produce your work?

I guess I say it over and over again because it is true, my backstory because of my parents. I think just hearing from a very young age all of the injustices that they faced and what my mother had to go through.

For the longest time I thought it was normal that everyone had refugees for parents and that everyone's parents were tortured.

Then I got older and realised that wasn't the case and then I was like, wow, if not everyone has refugees for parents, why aren't people talking about Refugees? And why aren't people talking about torture and fucked up government systems? And as I got older I really wanted to be able to portray that in some way shape or form and way that I figured out that I wanted to show that was through a visually art-based practice. So that's what kind of motivates me, being able to provide an alternative way of assessing information for those who might not be interested in reading the news.

I think a lot about who sees art and who's art communicable to. We communicate universally, we can communicate visually unless you have a visual impairment. Anyone who speaks any language can look at photo or an image or a sculpture, or whatever, some visual cue and decode it to mean something. And if I can take conceptual cues through visual work and have them be decoded amongst a variety of different audiences, I guess that can start disseminating information that's not just through the news or social

media. So, yeah, I guess that's what keeps me going is trying to reassess and distribute information in some way, shape or form.

I guess photography has that particular quality of reflecting the world directly and that makes it a very relatable medium and maybe it does operate and communicate very differently to writing and other forms. I'm really interested in the context that your work operates in. So it works for the majority in a fine arts context, do you think your work fits comfortably in that context?

In the fine arts world? Yeah, I guess so. It always makes me feel uncomfortable thinking about it because the minute you say "fine arts world" I think that goes hand in hand with commercial. I think it does because it takes the visual cues needed that contemporary art has but I think of that as a Trojan horse in a lot of ways. So yeah, it fits into that world I think.

This is another similar question. Because of the explicitly political content of your work, do you feel comfortable exhibiting in a gallery space?

When it comes to exhibiting and to who even buys my work, I refuse to show with the gallery if they aren't interested in the political content. I feel like to be interested in my work you have to be interested in the political content. A lot of the time people are like, "we just want to do a show of collaged image artists". And although that's interesting to me, if they don't know what my work's about or if they aren't going to be supportive of the content then I won't do it. And the same goes for collectors; it's not often that a collector is really going to want

images of executed or tortured people. But if they do and they don't really know what the politics at hand are then I'm not interested in participating.

I guess consequently, the majority of the exhibitions you are curated into do have a political focus.

They do, but there is always this danger too and I see it more and more now. I was kind of just griping about it yesterday. Because I got his email, I get emails that ask me to be part of themed exhibitions and group shows, “looking for ten Muslim women photographers to be this feature on Refinery29 and it's going to reach 25 million people.” It made me so angry because I am Middle Eastern, yes, but I don't identity as Muslim. But people assume that because you are from this specific place or because you make political work or something or another that you can fit into this mould. Even now I am becoming wary of shows that are trying to find even all Middle Eastern artists. That's starting that box thing too. I am trying to reassess my politics and how tokenism does not fit into that.

I think it's interesting as well that tokenism operates on a much larger scale in that these Western institutions display Middle Eastern Art all together and how that structure trickles down into smaller commercial galleries. Your work is incredibly complex and coded and really thoroughly researched. I was going to ask you if you could talk to us about your research and how you prepare to make a body of work?

Research for me in the past has been mostly online through communicating with people. For my last body of work I was in touch with a lot of human rights lawyers inside of Iran, communicating with them via the web, gathering PDF's on lists of executed people, women specifically in the country for the past five years; reading articles, watching news briefings. Right now I am starting to focus on the oil industry in the OPEC countries, I'm reading this book right now, "Halliburton's Army: How a well connected Texas oil company revolutionised the way America makes war." I'm looking at that, I'm looking at OPEC's website. I'm usually always using source images, there's always a folder on my desktop where I'm dragging, that I use for backdrops or I use for masks or I use for printing out and cutting up in my photos. Another part of my process is sketching what I think my photographs are going to look like. This is my plan for a shoot on Sunday and then I'll write down little lists of how it's going to go, how each scene is going to look. I'll probably sketch something at least 20 or 30 times before I figure out how to do it, assigning narratives through what I'm reading. Right now specifically I'm writing screen plays so all of the texts are adapted from public speeches and correspondence between all the leaders of OPEC so that's another layer of research.

So a lot of your images are sourced from the Internet?

Through the Internet I trade images with family members and victims' families as well. Every time I acquire an image it goes through the Internet, whether

I'm directly pulling it off of Google or getting it through correspondences, it's via the web.

Was it difficult to get in touch with human rights lawyers in that field and with the victims' families?

Absolutely, and I haven't gotten in touch with all of them, obviously it's just a small handful. The families are a lot easier to get in touch with because they are a lot more willing to talk and share the stories and they are actually who have put me in touch with human rights lawyers who have been working on the cases. It's tricky because I can't identify anyone because then I put them at risk, because they are still inside of the country. So all my sources are super private and I communicate with them via dark web so they don't have any trace.

Obviously their safety is the prime concern in that situation.

I'm excited that you are making screenplays but I wanted to ask about how you use sculpture and how you use collage and how you think that effects representation?

I think about collage a lot. When I start thinking about collage I think of Hannah Höch and DADA collage and thinking about when she was collaging bodies she was thinking about how the collage mechanises the body. Then I think a lot about the idea of the cyborg and how the cyborg is part human, part machine and what it means to cut up a body, it's also a violent act. Collage comes from the French word to 'cut and glue' and thinking about the act of

cutting something, specifically even an image of a human body becomes an aggressive act. Collage for me becomes a re-mediation of the bodies that I'm using. Am I giving them new identities? Or I am I giving them a new arena to identity within? And if so, what am I mashing them up with? And that kind of comes out in a sculptural sense too. The images that I'm finding are on the web so they are two-dimensional, screen-based images and then I print them. I print them as two-dimensional objects but I sculpt them as three-dimensional, then I re-photograph them again. I think of the act of re-photographing is an aggressive act because it's flattening all of the sculptural planes and that's reasserting the same aggression that happens in the images. So I think of sculpture as this way of re-animation.

So in a sense, the collage is pulling your subjects into a particular social and political context and the sculptural aspect is giving them an agency or a body? I was going to ask you how you protect the agency of your subjects or how you see their agency operating in your photos? I guess because you are so in control of the image-making process, whether they come in as subjects with their own sense of identity or are they pulled into a larger social-political collage?

I think they operate both ways. In each photograph, each character does have its own agency because of the specific way its being portrayed. But when it plays into the arena of the larger body of work it becomes another story in the mass of however many other images it's working within.

And I kind of view that as a member of society in a way, each member of society has its specific role and/or function and/or background and can

contribute in some way shape or form. And when multiple members come together they can take these experiences and create a larger collective consciousness of sorts.

And an archive of stories as well. Are you planning on making work that responds to the current socio-political climate in the US?

Yeah, I'm not going to use Trump directly that's for sure. To me Trump almost seems too topical. There are so many other problems at hand, he is a huge problem but he is a very new huge problem and he's a manifestation of many problems that are older. I think it's funny that we've forgotten about the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan for example. That's a predecessor to what's happening right now. But instead we're focusing on how George Bush likes Michelle Obama and forgetting about his role as a war criminal. So I'm trying to rewind to the past twenty years and look at what's been happening in Western companies through the oil trade and how our struggle with the Middle East and other oil-exporting countries is through the West's want or need to have a power-control over Petroleum.

You've been banned from re-entering Iran and I was wondering if you feel threatened and unsafe producing the work you are currently making?

I do and I don't. I do because I get death threats. People joke with me, you're going after the big oil companies you better be careful, you don't want to uncover anything they don't want. But with this new work I'm not so much in the business of uncovering. I was with the last series of work with the women

and I definitely did feel a little threatened and scared when I was making that work. With the new work, it's not uncovering information that hasn't been told or isn't known. It's more about taking that information and spinning it and giving it this dark humour to try and share it in some way shape or form.

Do you think there's a need for an ethical code of practice to follow for artists and photojournalists?

Absolutely. It's funny for me because I wanted to be a photojournalist when I started doing photography. I don't know if this is every photo-kids dream but I was like, I'm going to be a Nat-Geo photographer; I'm going to travel.

I remember we were on a summer trip, on vacation to Puerto Rico and I can't wait to photograph, I was 18. And we go and It's easy to photograph all the beautiful things like the sky and the ocean and the rainforest. We were driving around outside and I was like, "I need to take pictures of people" and I learnt how to say, "can I take your photo please?"

We were outside and I saw this man standing out in the rain and it was what looked like a beautiful image and I was going to take it. But I realised that I felt shy taking it and realised that I felt shy taking it because he was a marginalised body. He was someone who did not have the privilege of driving around in a nice car like we were. That's what made me stop and realise that photojournalism is an exploitative practice and I've gone further to think that the act of photography in any way, shape or form in actually an exploitative practice.

I was recently in New York at the MoMA at this photo forum and the discussion was on queer bodies in photography and all of these representations of queer bodies in photography. But they all looked the same in some way, shape or form. They all look queer based off of what society has marked as being queer. Like “a femme queer body has short hair and doesn't wear dresses” in a very stereotypical way. But in a society where we recognise things visually that's how we code. So I asked the question, “is it possible to photograph a queer body without exploiting a queer body?” I think the answer is no, it's not possible. I think that goes for photographing any body. The act of photographing is exploitative, I think it's a matter of how you use that type of exploitation and how you plan on creating content or discussion around the image after you've taken it.

Absolutely, I feel like it also depends on the photographer and what their intentions are. If that process of portraiture for example is intended to build community, record community very directly and feed back into that community or if it is stolen from that community and pushed into another context and then becomes coded and feeds stereotypes of queer bodies and marginalised bodies.

Absolutely. I think it all goes back to the intent of the person behind the hyper metaphorical camera in some way shape or form.