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The Making

I began collaborating with cultural producers in Kabul and Tehran in 2002, on projects dealing with gender representation and the political and social changes that have taken place since 1979. This was preceded by a study of Iranian cinema, pursued as a member of a group of students at the *Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe*. We intended to respond to the highly questionable propositions made by Samuel Huntington in *Clash of Civilizations* as well as the debates ensuing after September 11th by dealing with the medium of film. Iranian films by Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and others had become popular through the film festivals Cannes and Locarno starting in the 1980s. Despite political restrictions, these directors succeeded, each in their own way, in addressing topical social issues within Iran. In addition to art house films, we also examined works of younger filmmakers, some of whom lived outside of Iran. Impressed by these films and how they visualize contradictions in Tehran, a metropolis of millions, I developed the idea for a script on the changes this city has undergone since the revolution in 1979. In November 2002, I flew to Tehran for the first time to do research there, accompanied by the Iranian-Swiss filmmaker Sonia Shafie. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, an important person for my research, happened to be not in Tehran but filming in Kabul. We spontaneously accepted the invitation to visit him in the Afghan capital and booked a flight from Tehran. He was assisting the Afghan filmmaker Siddiq Barmak with the coordination of some of the larger scenes in Barmak's *Osama*, the first Afghan feature film produced after the fall of the Taliban regime.

We drove directly to the shooting location. A re-enactment of a demonstration of women against the Taliban regime was being filmed. More than 1,000 women had gathered to participate as extras. Nobody had reckoned with such a huge number. Demonstrating was now being rehearsed and the production assistant urged the extras to recall their experiences of the recent Taliban past. I used a video camera to document the making of this scene.

Back in Berlin, the filmmaker Elfe Brandenburger and I edited the short film *The Making of a Demonstration* from my documentary material. The film focuses on the necessary processes that make scenes in a feature film convincing: the rehearsal of the lay actresses, the repetition of individual scenes, preparing the props, the waiting – and, in the end, paying the protagonists. The film showed in art venues and festivals. Paradoxically, *The Making of a Demonstration* was understood by some as a traditional "making of" – a documentation of how Siddiq Barmak directed *Osama* – and was included as an extra on the German DVD version of *Osama*. Due to misunderstandings in this context about who directed *Osama*, we decided to re-edit our film.

Passing the Rainbow

In 2004 I return to Kabul, together with Elfe Brandenburger. We want to find out what moved the women – even if masked by burkas – to participate in such large numbers in a demonstration scene against the regime so shortly after the Taliban had been toppled. What were their motives? What effect did performing as actresses have on them? What forms of women’s resistance against the Taliban regime had existed and what strategies are they currently pursuing? We are also interested in the different performative strategies used in everyday life, ranging from political work to acting.

The protagonists adjust the production of the film *Passing the Rainbow* to their own conditions in order, within that framework, to participate in a public statement. They act as co-producers of the images, shaping the content of scenes and moving in and out of the role of director. This is apparent in the parts of the film that reveal our shooting conditions – most clearly in the preparatory scene with the actress and schoolteacher Aiqela Rezaie as she explains how we must behave in order to be allowed to film her at her school. She explains what it would mean for her socially if she is seen as collaborating with us. To avoid this, she outlines a plan for approaching the headmistress of the school – a plan to which we strictly adhere. In another scene, the interpreter Sakeena Habibzada interrupts the shooting by asking me to turn off the camera before entering the faculty room. The protagonist Malek_a insists that we record sound only in our conversation with her. Our own visibility is thus marked precisely at the point where the protagonists become active authors of the film process.

Life and character collide and overlap, as do playfulness and activism. Marina Golbahari, the lead actress in *Osama*, explains how her role in the film related to her real life. The police-woman Saba Sahar produces action films in which she plays the leading part as a police-woman. She stages increasingly sophisticated martial arts scenes, while simultaneously demanding the binding rule of law. The former teacher and actress Breshna Bahar appears as the spokeswoman of the fictive female president of Afghanistan. In a demonstration scene, the two actresses Hamida Refah and Zobaida Sahar, who play the grandmother and daughter in *Osama*, demand the improvement of their housing situation. Hamida takes over directing as we stage a scene from a fairy tale. The actresses of the demonstration scene in *Osama* speak of their current political problems. A girls’ theater group rehearses educative plays about the upcoming elections; the male roles are alternately played by different girls.

We return to Kabul in 2006, to discuss the rough cut with those involved. The actress Breshna Bahar asks us to remove a dance scene with her because dancing in public is deemed unseemly, especially for women. Another protagonist, married into a conservative family, is no longer allowed to appear in any film whatsoever. Since her scenes are important and we don’t want to delete them completely, we develop a digital effect retaining the figure’s movements but abstracting identifiable facial expressions. These consultations and changes are necessary in order to show the film in Afghanistan without causing problems for the protagonists.

There are women in the film who don’t want to be recognized for other reasons: An activist of the covertly operating organization RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) who advocates the separation of state and religion; women whose husbands, brothers or sons forbid them to play in films; a girl who earns a living for her family as a boy. They consciously opt for different strategies to make themselves anonymous, thus remaining visible in the film by being unidentifiable. Burka and chador become strategic instruments and the separation of image and sound enables us to establish anonymity on other levels.

As we assemble *Passing the Rainbow*, we do not question the exact genre of the film being made. Our approach is inspired and influenced rather by the theme of acting, by questions related to how representation is engendered and by the collaborative production process of a film. *Passing the Rainbow* maneuvers the borders of various genres. We combine film excerpts, making-of recordings, scenes we staged ourselves, and documentary recordings of protagonists speaking about their filmic or political work. This variegated material is edited into smaller and larger intertwined dramaturgical sequences, which, as episodes, form an overarching narrative. We opt for an analytical approach showing the different methods with which the protagonists in Kabul intervene in social and gender-hegemonic processes – no matter if this takes place on the level of acting, in political work, or in everyday life. To avoid presenting the difficulties of specific protagonists as the fate of a single individual, some conflicts are dramatized in collaboration with the women. This creates a scope of action in which a process of appropriation and shifting takes place: for example, by playing male roles in the girls’ theater group. Gender roles are reflected and possibilities of action can be practiced in a playful setting, transcending existing restrictions. In *Passing the Rainbow*, switching gender roles is anchored in a socio-political reality through Malek_a: a girl living as a boy in order to earn a living for her family. *Passing the Rainbow* is about shifting/traversing the binary organization of gender roles and about the gutsy changing of existing gender and power constellations. These actions cannot be reduced to an identity or to specific political concepts.

Speaking nearby

While editing the film, I discover the text *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning* by the Vietnamese-American director Trinh T. Minh-ha. It begins as follows: “There is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques.”¹ For me, Minh-ha’s provocative opening had a liberating effect. She directs thinking and speaking towards the film itself and demands a way of speaking that eludes fixed categories and classifications. This demand for precise formulations, going beyond defined standards, reveals parallels to the fragile process of montage where each cut marks an important decision in the production process. Minh-ha also points to the power structures inherent to reality itself, in which the producer intervenes in a shaping way with her work on the film: “Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction. To understand this, is to recognize the naivety of a development of cinematic technology that promotes

increasing unmediated “access” to reality. (...) A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction.”² In *Passing the Rainbow*, we are therefore interested both in existing gender-power constellations in society and in cinematic representation.

The classical ethnographic film resists the artificiality of cinema. Even if it is now accepted by most ethnographic filmmakers that filmic recordings are not objective, such recordings are still being collected to analyze culture and thus serve as a foundation for scientific research. In the context of a three-year ethnographic research project in Senegal, Minh-ha shot the film *Reassemblage* (1982), which I saw in 2008 – after our film was completed – as part of the film series *Etnografies Experimentals* in Barcelona.³ Images are repeatedly interrupted and shown without sound. Then sound is faded in again and takes on a life of its own. The off-screen voice of Minh-ha reflects on her role as an observer, as well as on the role of the missionary and the social workers. By disrupting the process of representation on different levels, she expands the medium of film. In applying this approach, she refuses to establish meaning by speaking “about a culture”. The process of “speaking about” is replaced by a “speaking nearby”, by the filmmaker abandoning an “objective” viewpoint. Precisely for this reason, we point out at the beginning of our film that *Passing the Rainbow* is not a film about women in Afghanistan. We seek to make it clear that we neither take on an “objective” narrator perspective, nor speak from a gender-binary perspective. In an interview with Nancy N. Chen, Minh-ha describes the process of “speaking nearby” as follows: “A speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition.”⁴ Trinh T. Minh-ha believes that the political becomes visible precisely in ambiguous attributions and cannot be separated from aesthetics: “If life’s paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degrees and nuances is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather, empties it, or decentralizes it.”⁵ *Passing the Rainbow* offers various strategies to abandon a one-dimensional reading in favor of multi-perspectivity: the female protagonists, who are co-producers and appear in different roles or comment on the roles they play, the visualization of the production conditions, our influence on making the film, and the making-of scenes reflecting on how authenticity is produced.

The film continues

Our film *Passing the Rainbow* premieres in May 2008 at the Kabul film festival SECOND TAKE on gender and society.⁶ There are conflicting responses. Some find the film too many-voiced. Others regard precisely this quality as its strong point and recognize the passing of the rainbow as the dramaturgical thread. “Passing the rainbow” refers to an Afghan myth,

according to which boys and girls can change their gender, if they like, when passing the rainbow. This is the story the grandmother tells her granddaughter in the film *Osama* before giving her a masculine haircut. In our film, the myth is referred to in the title and a schoolgirl retells it when talking about the film *Osama*. Triggered by the German accent of the Dari commentary, the purity of language is also controversially discussed and then connected to the theme of migration. The use of the burka as a media-strategic decision is interpreted in different ways. Some don’t want to read it as a strategy for anonymity because they don’t regard it as necessary for speaking in public.

Stagings

In 2008 the curators Montse Romani and Virginia Villaplana suggest showing *Passing the Rainbow* in Barcelona within the context of the exhibition *Working Documents*. I decide not to show the film as an exhibition loop; I prefer to present it as a joint venture at the festival *Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones de Barcelona*. The screening is accompanied by a panel discussion to which we invite the Kabul director Diana Saqeb. Her film *25 Darsad (25 Per Cent)*, about female members of parliament in Kabul, is also shown at the festival. This cooperation enables us to expand the exhibition format and to connect with projects in Barcelona dealing with similar subject matters. For the exhibition itself, I edit the two-channel video installation *to act in history*. The installation uses the origination process of the film *Passing the Rainbow* as the starting point, rearranges the used material, takes up scenes that were not included in the film, reflects on how the film was received in Berlin and Kabul and adds rarely shown historical recordings from the archives of the Nancy Hatch Duprée and Williams Afghan Media Project. In so doing, I again refer to the image as a process that denies an unambiguous attribution, a process that can be continued by reception.

On the other side of the installation’s projection screen is a selection of five films. Visitors can choose which one they want to view from this mobile cinema. The films were shot in Afghanistan and Iran and deal with the construction of gender relations. In addition to the film *Passing the Rainbow*, two other films shot in Afghanistan in 2007 can be viewed here: Diana Saqeb’s *25 Darsad* and the action film *Nejat (Rescue)* by Saba Sahar, in which the director plays the role of a super heroine. Both films deal in different ways with the “democratization process” that commenced in 2002. The short feature film *Saya (Shadow)* by Nacir Alqas from 1990 refers to the brief history of Afghan cinema and portrays the difficulties of a war widow and her child from her first marriage. The film *Le Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Iraniennes – Année Zéro (The Liberation Movement of Iranian Women in the Year Zero)* from 1979 expands the scope to include the neighboring country of Iran. The documentary film shot by the French group Politics and Psychoanalysis in the streets of Tehran accompanies the first protests against the newly established regime: women demonstrating against the decree of the revolutionary leader Khomeini demanding mandatory veiling.

The entire installation is titled *stagings*. With the notion of stage or staging, I refer to the constructedness of reality, to different cinematic representations, as well as to stagings in political and social everyday life. The installation was previously on view in a slightly altered form in September 2008 in Jet gallery Berlin in an exhibition series curated by Lena Ziese that was dedicated to artists whose concepts of life have an impact on their artistic practices.

Urban settings and other kinds too

The photo series *Urban settings and other kinds too* deals with the idea of setting reality as a stage. The pictures printed in this book were taken in Kabul between 2002 and 2008. The selection made here reflects the conviction that it is impossible to convey a comprehensive image of a city. What interests me in these photos is how public and private spaces are inscribed by specific gestures. They include, for example, the way in which the international military marks its territory in urban space, the architectural traces of the investment competition between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War, a miniature Eiffel Tower in the middle of a traffic island in the recently constructed district of Taimani, how gender segregation is inscribed in public space using the example of the Baq-e zanana (Park of Women) and how leisure time on the weekend is spent driving to the mountains by car for a picnic.

Gender politics and its international representation

As I begin making this book in April of 2009, I hear news of the introduction of the Shiite family law in Afghanistan. Outrage is voiced in the international press. The law is regarded as re-Talibanization of women's rights, with a primary focus on Article 132, whereby wives are obliged to have sexual intercourse, and on article 133, whereby wives must ask their husbands' permission to leave the house. Diana Saqeb, whom I call in Kabul to discuss the possibility of a second edition of the SECOND TAKE festival, tells me she is currently preparing a campaign against the introduction of Shiite family law. Her colleague Malek Shafi'i says that it is now all the more urgent to organize a further festival on gender and society to prevent such a law in the future. He is also involved in preparing the campaign.

Several days later, I see pictures of the protests in the papers. I recognize friends and colleagues with whom I have discussed seminars and semi-public meetings. I'm surprised that almost all women have the heart to openly show their faces. A chain of men and police officers tries to protect them against the attacks of predominantly male counter demonstrators. It is one of the few demonstrations initiated by women that directly intervenes in political events and in which they formulate very specific demands. Although there have repeatedly been demonstrations of women in the past years on the occasion of International Women's Day, the demands raised there were quite general, and the female demonstrators only march-

ed a few hundred yards along the street in a remote part of the city on their way to the rally held in the Women's Park. The demonstration against Shiite family law, however, is held directly in front of the centrally located Khatam-al-Nabeyeen mosque of Ayatollah Mohseni, and the protest march proceeds to the presidential palace to hand their petition to President Karzai.

The debate on Shiite family law is a symptom of the current political entanglement of various interest groups, including the international community, local politicians and power-holders, ethnic and religious groups, the clergy and the citizens. There are also signs of a conflict that is rooted in the constitution itself, for, in case of doubt, every law must be subjected to the Sharia. In Western reports, the details of the 253 articles of Shiite family law⁷ remain unclear.

In an interview on the protests against the law, I talk with the filmmaker Diana Saqeb, whose activist work for the rights of women began with organizing the demonstration. In a conversation with the filmmaker Siddiq Barmak, he in turn draws my attention to an article first published in the British daily *The Independent* in April 2009 by the journalist Nelofer Pazira. At this stage during the debate on Shiite family law, Nelofer Pazira stays in Kabul. She is immediately cast as an authentic reporter by the international media due to her popularity and Afghan descent. In her article, she expresses her anger at and criticism of the selective and distorting coverage in the international media. I decided to reprint it because it at once addresses and resists the calls of the Western media for an authentic voice reporting on how Afghan women are repressed, which is instrumentalized both nationally and internationally.

In Afghanistan, disillusionment is now widespread, both with Western "aid" and local politics. My friends and colleagues in Kabul are at a loss, just as I am, as to how things will go in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, all people are trying to continue their work as well as they can and to influence social and political processes within the scope of their possibilities.

1 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, in: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, New York/London, 1991 (p. 29).

2 Ibid. (pp. 39-41); In her text *Contested Values*, Madeleine Bernstorff elaborates on the relation of reality and fiction in documentary films.

3 The film series *Etnografies Experimentals* was curated by Virginia Villaplana and Montse Romani and shown in the context of the film festival *Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones de Barcelona*.

4 Nancy N. Chen: *Speaking Nearby, A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha*, in: *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 1992 (p. 87).

5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, in: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, New York/London, 1991 (p. 41).

6 We curated the festival in cooperation with the artists' group CACA-Kabul, the state-run film institute Afghan Film and the organization Open Asia. The festival in Kabul was preceded by the film programme SPLICE IN in Kassel, Berlin and Hamburg.

7 The complete law was translated into English within the frame of the USAID's Afghanistan Rule of Law Project (ARoLP) and can be downloaded from their homepage, along with a selection of laws that have been classified as infringing on human rights and women's rights. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2252,4565c25f35,4a24ed5b2,0.html>