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An ethics of questioning. An interview with Bani Khoshnoudi - Each Dawn a Censor Dies

28–35 minutes

Dec. 21 2015

Bani Khoshnoudi. Photo : Felipe Perez-Burchard

“Each face could be that of a political prisoner or a martyr,” says Bani Khoshnoudi in her masterpiece *The Silent Majority Speaks*, which was filmed in Tehran during the Green Movement in 2009, and only distributed clandestinely under the pseudonym “The Silent Collective” until 2013. To be witness to a popular uprising against the dictatorship, while taking care not to endanger those whom she filmed; to go over a century of political upheaval that has been more or less insurrectionary and always repressed to the point of bloodshed; to reflect on the lethal, toxic yet sometimes, on the contrary, emancipatory function of images: the sum of these tasks, taken up in *The Silent Majority Speaks*, clearly show the self-demanding nature that moves the visual artist, filmmaker and producer Bani Khoshnoudi. Fleeing all dogmatism, she develops what one could call an “activism of questioning”, which she has practiced in the context of popular protests in Iran, the anti-migrant political situation in France, or even Zapotec culture in Mexico. In a book on self-liberation whose title, *Les sauvages dans la cité* (‘Savages in the City’), recalls the name that Bani Khoshnoudi has chosen for her production house, thus placing it under the aegis of Claude Levi-Strauss’ “la Pensée Sauvage” or the “The Savage Mind”, the historian René Parize made a distinction between “submissive knowledge” and “the knowledge of revolt »*.

Faced with political-religious censorship as much as certain strategies of self-censorship, Bani Khoshnoudi’s work develops not only an ingenious expertise of “the knowledge and know-how of revolt”, but also and especially, something essential: an unbreakable conviction, as one will discover in the following interview.

Nicole Brenez: Could you describe your artistic process: your background, training and achievements?

Bani Khoshnoudi: I began my artistic explorations while very young through drawing and painting, but during my adolescence I quickly became fascinated by photography. My high school had a laboratory, and I signed up for a journalism course to get access to it. I would steal rolls of film so I could do my own photography, which I developed and printed in secret in the darkroom at school. I was so taken when I discovered the effect that light had on film, and was immediately conquered by the paradox of the possibilities and limitations of the camera and celluloid. Since I couldn’t stop taking photographs, my father built me a darkroom at home. Yet when it was time to go to university, my family did not agree to me studying art, so I started out by studying architecture, which my father saw as a compromise between art and science; something that would help me find a job later. Even though I was interested in

the aesthetics and historical aspects of architecture, I could tell that this field would be too rigid for me, and my desire to explore photography and the other arts really was irrepressible. After a few months, I gave up my architectural studies and transferred to the Photography department, which was located in the same building as the film school. It was there that I discovered my love of cinema and began making films. At first it was through film history or film theory (*cinema studies*), but philosophy and ethnography also played a big role. Then, little by little I started collaborating on projects and shooting short films. This was in the 1990s, when the cinema community in Austin, Texas was emerging. Richard Linklater and other cinephiles had founded the Austin Film Society, which was where I discovered Tarkovsky, Oshima, Satyajit Ray and others. I assisted local directors who were shooting films and worked on school projects, which allowed me to live an amazing period of experimentation and collaboration. At the same time, I was continuing my studies in Cinema and Italian, and since this was a public university, I was able to take additional courses in sociology, philosophy, literature and history. Thanks to several remarkable teachers, I discovered Godard, Chris Marker, Jean Rouch, Frederick Wiseman and Dennis O'Rourke, among others, but also writers and thinkers such as James Baldwin, Pirandello, Roland Barthes, Hannah Arendt, Cesare Pavese, Donna Haraway, Deleuze… Anyway, my student years marked me deeply. When I finally started making my own films, at first I had no idea what I was doing, or even what kind of films I wanted to create, but once I actually started working, I never doubted my decision or had the slightest desire to do anything else, even if this field is sometimes oppressively precarious.

After completing my studies, I went to live in Europe; first in Rome, then Paris. That same year, I also took my first trip back to Iran after being away for 22 years. I was making several experimental short films that allowed me to explore what I had discovered there, but also here, without feeling obliged to make any strong statement. At the same time I was doing diverse jobs in Paris, and was very active, independently, but also with some groups, in denouncing the situation of immigrants in France and Europe. I visited the Sangatte refugee camp near Calais, and met hundreds of people, many from Iran and Afghanistan, as well as Kurds from Iraq. In 2002, when Sarkozy (then Minister of the Interior) closed the camp, we formed a collective to try and shed some light on the profound injustice and the repressive mechanisms that were used against these people who had crossed half the world. The situation on the streets of Paris was becoming unbearable; hundreds of people (men, women and children) were sleeping outside, even during the winter. In 2004 I made *Transit*, a short film that I wrote inspired by the stories of migrants I met at Sangatte. I made the film in collaboration with exiles who were in Paris at the time and who essentially played themselves. This was, one might say, my first 'real' film, and I was surprised by the response when it came out. I won awards and the film was widely seen. I then made *A People in the Shadows*, a documentary about the city where I was born, Tehran, while inspired by the methods of Jean Rouch and Frederick Wiseman. The film is a sort of trance- like wandering in the city, exploring both the city itself but also my subjective view of it, as well as the power of the camera, as I filmed it completely hand- held. After completing this film, I was invited to the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program, where I had the opportunity to continue with my theoretical research, and was able to make more experimental work in the form of video and sound installations. I was thinking a lot about the archive and first-person testimonies as material to work with. Two years later, I made *Ziba*, my first fiction feature, which I filmed in Iran, and which somehow marked the end of an 'Iranian period' in my work. I currently live in Mexico City, where I have several ongoing projects. And, of course, between 2009 and 2010 I made a documentary called *The Silent Majority Speaks*, which I have kept secret until recently.

NB: How were you able to make *The Silent Majority Speaks* **?**

BK: Initially, I had no idea that I was going to make a film. I was in Tehran during the 2009 election, and naturally I had started filming in the streets. What I saw and experienced during the weeks leading up to the election was unprecedented; everyone was living in such a state of euphoria that I felt as if I was in a trance while walking around holding my camera. Actually, during the election campaign it was as if we were living in another country. It was a moment of great freedom and tolerance, a time when we could say or do almost anything, even if we still maintained our discretion (and, for women, our headscarves, of course). I sometimes stayed

outside for twelve hours straight, walking, talking and filming. At night, I would go out with friends to see the “demonstrations” and spontaneous gatherings. All of this was before the vote took place. The day after the vote, when it became obvious there had been a tremendous fraud, we returned to the streets, but this time in anger. I continued filming until I became afraid for my life – that was the day when they killed Neda Agha-Soltan [editor’s note: June 20, 2009] – and then I left Tehran.

I took my images with me, but since I was so devastated by what I had been through and what was still going on in Iran, it took me some time before I felt capable of returning to these images and constructing the film. I initially wanted to get rid of the material and just give it to somebody else to use, because it was too much for me and I didn’t know how to make a film without risking never being able to return to Iran again. But after talking with two or three possible candidates, I soon realized that I had a responsibility to everyone who allowed me to film them and spoke openly and fearlessly in front of the camera. Then I became fascinated by what was happening on the Internet; the videos people posted on YouTube, etc. I saw it as a signal for me that it was necessary to talk about this new way of protesting, while documenting the oppression and violence of the state. Unknowingly, Iranians were creating a people’s archive that would serve us in both the present and the future. The Iranian protests actually set a precedent so far as the use of social networks and the Internet were concerned, since we’ve subsequently seen them being used during revolts in many other countries, notably Tunisia and Egypt. I knew that there was something to say about all this, and so I began developing the idea for what would become *The Silent Majority Speaks*. I only started really working with the material once I received financial and moral support from the Jan Vrijman Fund of the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam – IDFA, (translator’s note – now known as the IDFA Bertha Fund). They really wanted to help bring this film into existence and assured me that my identity would be protected. The film also wouldn’t have been possible without the participation of some very dear and courageous people who contributed to the post-production, and especially the anonymous individuals who filmed on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities, and posted their images on the Internet. This film is dedicated to them for both their courage and the indispensable contribution they have made to our collective memory.

NB: Did you immediately want to create a grand political fresco, or was your initial impulse simply to document the immediate history?

BK: At first I thought I would do a pretty classical film dealing with events before and after the 2009 election, that would convey the general feeling of the people in the streets and the events that were happening. My intentions for the film actually developed in several stages. Initially, I wanted to document what was happening in the streets during the campaign, focusing on this surprising and never before seen freedom of speech that we were experiencing in Iran then. It showed what we would be capable of if we didn’t have the repressive machine hovering over us. Then, just after the fraud or ‘coup d’état’ (as we were calling it) took place, I knew that I had to document the immediate history as it was unfolding and the revolt that was taking shape, without knowing where all this might be heading (so far as the movement was concerned as well as for my images). After leaving Iran, I began to accumulate images into a sort of personal archive, and as I was living with the images that I had filmed, I started developing more profound ideas and thinking in increasingly broader ways about the events and the historical moment. During this period, I was rereading familiar texts and was researching further into Iranian history, politics and sociology. I read dozens of books and texts, sometimes on the history of Iran or testimonies of political prisoners (from the past or even the present). I then searched for images and sounds from the past and the present that seemed to reflect our modern history. These were photos, archival film of demonstrations and other images of political events, propaganda films, television images, audio and visual clips from the war in Iraq, images from trials from the Shah’s time, as well as other trials filmed in 2009, and of course scenes of violence as people kept documenting them in the current revolt. For a few months this become a sort of sickness for me, since the information and images kept piling up, and I never stopped filling my hard drives with them. It was one thing after another, and I almost went crazy. At one point I just said’STOP’, and began thinking about the editing, about how to put all this material into some kind of order. That was when I knew I wanted to make a bigger and more extended film dealing with the question of protest and revolution in

Iran, but also about the importance and impact of images from the past and the present on our behavior, as well as the dynamic of the archive, of memory and of collective will.

NB: Did you have certain stylistic references in terms of visual-political analysis, such as *The Hour of the Furnaces* **(1968) by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, or Chris Marker's** *A Grin Without a Cat* **(1977), or Armand Mattelart's** *The Spiral* **(1976)?**

BK: Of course. I discovered Solanas and Marker, but also Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile* (1975-1979) and other similar films of the same era when I was at university. *A Grin Without a Cat* has always been a monumental film for me, and I have watched it several times. Each time I watch it again, I find new ideas in it, which is in a way, what I love about Chris Marker. This film influenced me because, as a filmmaker, Chris Marker was not afraid to take some distance from his subjects in order to make us question the politics and ideologies behind the various movements and political parties, and thus to discover the meaning of human participation in it all. His films and his intervention in his images are of a superior intelligence, and a great source of inspiration. I also liked many Cuban films from the 1960s, but sometimes I would be put off by the propaganda and tend to prefer when films ask questions, even if these questions remain unanswered, instead of conveying established or absolute ideas. Marker's films (as well as those of Godard from his Dziga Vertov Group period) inspired me to ask questions and to open my mind, which I believe should be the purpose of this kind of cinema.

NB: *The Silent Majority Speaks* **is a particularly rich and eloquent film on the diverse and sometimes contradictory role that images play in our collective history. How did you construct and organize this aspect of your work?**

BK: I had created my own archive with all kinds of images, sounds and texts, as well as all the material that I was finding on the Internet on this subject. Using my own material as a starting point, I was then going after other images. I love coincidence and the role that other people's participation can play in the process of artistic creation, so I was very open to chance and what I was coming across during those months of work. After assembling a rough cut that ran approximately three hours, I contacted an editor, who unfortunately was not available to work with me, but she looked at the material and asked me questions that then sparked ideas in me about how to go about finding a structure. I covered a wall in my studio with paper and began attaching notes to it with different ideas, phrases, thoughts, but also photos from my archive.
I established a kind of 'timeline' out of this material, which was physically posted up on my wall, and then I started making connections and associations between the various elements. While editing, I took images from my 'archive' and followed the immediate associations that came up, and then the images themselves instigated others, and little by little, the central ideas of the film took form. The repetitions that I saw in the material imposed themselves on me, and so I based the voice-over that I wrote on this as well. I would say that the history of these images, from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, was already there; I just had to do this excavation and establish the connections that lie behind it all.

NB: How was the film distributed? Why is it now possible to reveal your name, which was originally concealed behind the initial pseudonym that you used, 'The Silent Collective'?

BK: The film has received very little distribution, probably because there was no "director" to present it in the beginning. For reasons related to my need to travel freely to Iran and to make other films there, I kept this secret for a long time. IDFA, the festival that gave me support to make the film, screened it in their festival, but since they don't really have a distribution branch, they couldn't do much more for it. Then, thanks to an Iranian friend who lives in Germany, the film was screened in galleries in exhibitions and events that dealt with the revolts in Arab countries (the Arab Spring), as well as those related to his own work on collective memory. He screened the film a few times, and some people from Egypt saw it there and then showed it in Cairo, where I know it had a strong resonance.
And that was it, up until I revealed my identity, mainly thanks to your support, Nicole. After that, the film was shown in a few festivals, starting with ART OF THE REAL, which is curated by Dennis Lim and Rachael Rakes at the Lincoln Center in New York, and then in Lussas. Finally, it was Jocelyne Saab who programmed it for her festival in Lebanon, but it was censured and banned from being shown by the Lebanese authorities, so that

never took place. Now, I would like the film to be able to be seen more. Even if I will never have the certainty that it's safe for me, I'm ready now to take the risk. There will always be this uncertainty for me, but I feel that the film should be seen. In any case, the film is also the result of the collective archives that Iranians were unknowingly compiling, so the material can't be seen as work of an individual, even if I was the person who made the film.

NB: *The Silent Majority Speaks* **shares certain images with** *Where Is This place? This is Iran, My Land and Yours* **(2009). What is the relationship between these two films?**

BK: You mean the images with which I begin the film? The shots that I took from a video posted on YouTube, with the girl in Tehran talking over nighttime images? In fact, just after the revolt began, when night would fall over the city, we would all go up to the rooftops and yell out "Death to the Dictator" (it seems people were doing the same thing in other cities too). This was our way of continuing the protest at night and to communicate with each other across the city's rooftops, in order to remind ourselves that we were not alone. Living in Iran can sometimes be intensely alienating, because it's not easy to live openly or freely in the public sphere, which causes everyone to stick to their own circle within the safety of their own homes. As in any revolt anywhere in the world, when night falls the risk of arrests and disappearances increases. That's why we would stop and go home every night, but then at nine o'clock we would go up to the rooftops in order to continue protesting, by shouting into the darkness. I also filmed these nightly sessions, but one morning (I think it was just after the first night), I saw this girl's video that was circulating on social networks. Like many others, I was extremely touched, and I felt that she conveyed a clear idea of our resistance within the alienation of Iran. For me, it was a poetic way of communicating the anti-authoritarian discourse that was growing in the streets. This girl, with her trembling voice yet strong presence, expressed everything we felt: a certain despair and a sense of being imprisoned or trapped, even though we were in the beginnings of a huge revolt, the most significant to have taken place in Iran since the Revolution of 1979.

NB: How does *The Silent Majority Speaks,* 2010*,* **relate to your installations** *Paradox Of Time: Studies in Memory (Parts 1 – 3),* 2012**?**

BK: Since I needed to continue my research into issues of repetition – repetitions of history, of revolt, trauma, images, and human acts – after having finished the film, I started making a series of studies on images, their duration, and how they impact memory and affect. While playing with durations and juxtapositions, I discovered that something psychological and emotional happens when we watch archival images that refer to key moments of history. These studies, that I made with archival footage, show our profound attachment to and dependency in terms of the past and collective memory. Even if we were not present during certain events or do not remember them well, our minds retain these images of revolts, victories, violence, joy, and pain. I would like to explore and better understand the power of images to provoke and stimulate. Images are ultra-powerful; we experienced that during the revolt in 2009. The images of violence and death documented by citizens and posted on the Internet for everyone to see, were a way of calling out to our collective memory and will, as a means to call for action. While I am wary of the power of images, especially archival images, I still found it important that people continued documenting the events. This is a concern I have, but for which I have reached no conclusions. Nonetheless, inspires me to continue carrying out these studies in the form of installations.

NB: As a result (provisional, of course) of these intense experiences and reflections on the representation of collective history, what has become of your conception of the power of film and images in general?

BK: I think cinema and images are still, and always will be, ultra-powerful. In fact, I would say that they have taken on a more central and important place in our lives than before, even if the way we relate to them now has more to do with consumption than with selection. I think Walter Benjamin was definitively right about that, even if sometimes it is not what I am the most worried about. For me, the real problem or crisis has more to do with our inability to reflect and analyze, sometimes to reject or be critical when watching films and the flow of images. We no longer cultivate the way we look and perceive, but easily accept trends, the influences and dynamics of the market and its derivatives (the film industry, its festivals and even some critics are involved in this). Laziness,

conformism and the acceptance of capitalist and liberal norms and values on the part of producers and viewers of films, have contributed to a certain banalization of our powerlessness. I say powerlessness because we often do not require ourselves to understand what we are saying or seeing in films. We like things that confirm our preconceptions; we give an advantage to films that do not put us into question and that reiterate a certain Eurocentric taste and language. It is to the point where we can no longer complain about being victims of American hegemony, since we reproduce this hegemony in our own contexts.

NB: What other contemporary initiatives relating to film activism seem the most significant to you?

BK: Unfortunately I have not see many of these films, so I cannot give you a satisfactory answer. I haven't seen many of the films made about the revolts in the Arab countries (Egypt, Tunisia). The Mosireen group did interesting work in Egypt, although that is more seen within the context of contemporary art than in cinemas. Often times it seems that the films being produced by today's movements try to push their discourse without nuance or complexity. There is no room for reflection, which is what interests me the most in the end. I'm thinking of certain films linked with the anti-globalist movement (if it still exists), Occupy movements, etc. A number of filmmakers have become interested in political topics, but sometimes it seems more like opportunism or a way to make money from something that should not be profitable. It has almost become a genre in itself. On the other hand, I sometimes see short pieces or testimonies filmed by people who are involved in struggles in places that are quite forgotten and poorly documented. I'm thinking of videos made by independent resistance groups, like the Community Police for example, in regions such as Guerrero or Michoacán in Mexico. These documents seem very important to me because they not only have been made with a purpose for the present moment, to provide information to the world that continues to be blind to their struggles; but also in an attempt to create an archive of testimonials that will be needed later. But in general, I prefer films that interrogate the politics of the image or aesthetic practices, rather than those that deal with politics period.

NB: For close to a decade, the art world has been reflecting on the artistic treatment of archival documents, what Okwui Enwezor called "Archive Fever" in 2008. In this context, does the work of any specific artists or curators particularly interest you?

BK: I like Martha Rosler's work with photomontages, and am fascinated by the work of Alfredo Jaar as well. These artists are both working in highly politicized ways on our gaze and our desire, in addition to the subjects they deal with. W.G. Sebald's books, which for me belong to the world of literature, but also closely relate to the world of art and (fictitious?) archives, are very interesting to me. The way in which Sebald speaks of origins, History, our stories and our memory, touches me deeply. As far as cinema is concerned, there is Andrei Ujică and his tireless work on Romania; not only the film he co- directed with Harun Farocki – *Vidèogrammes d'une rèvolution* (1992), which is a masterpiece – but also the last one he made using Ceausescu's personal archive [editor's note: *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*, 2010]. I also like the playful but still highly politicized work of Craig Baldwin, who belongs to a tradition close to that of René Viénet, because I find that these films allow us to reflect on how images are manufactured and manipulated, as well as our naive faith in what they tell us.

NB: What are your current projects?

BK: I'm preparing several projects at the moment, mostly in Mexico, where I have lived for the last 6 years. I am currently finishing the editing of a film that was commissioned by the Danish festival CPH:DOX. It is an experimental fiction, with documentary elements, but mostly with references to cinema and using an absurdist tone, influenced by Theatre of the Absurd, which I love. I made it in collaboration with some young people and some friends from Teotítlan, a small village in Oaxaca, where we filmed during Carnival.

I am also preparing to film in 2016, my second fiction feature, *Fireflies*, which tells the story of a young, Iranian homosexual in exile, in a port city in Mexico, Veracruz. I wrote the story after having read a true story of an Iraqi man who ended up in Mexico after having hidden on a cargo ship. It immediately made me think about the new wave of immigration and exile of young Iranians in the last few years.

I am also developing another fiction film, a feature that I will shoot in Paris, but that is still in the scriptwriting phase. It also deals with questions of exile, memory and the history of Iran, while using some narratives forms from the thriller genre. And there are also various documentary projects that are with me for a while now, and that are taking their form slowly; experimental exercises and essays.

NB: Do you have any advice to give, or a message to relay, or a practical solution to communicate to other filmmakers in the world that find themselves in an oppressive situation?

BK: It's a difficult question to reply to because each person lives in a particular situation and has to confront different challenges and threats as he or she is making work. In any case, what I have learned from my own situation, is that one has to stay honest with oneself and do only as much as is possible in a given situation. The oppression can also come from inside oneself, or in any case, be the result of outside pressures that we repeat unto ourselves. The only solution that I see is to believe in yourself and your projects, and to not succumb to the doubts that are caused by outside forces. On the other hand, we cannot pretend to provoke huge changes by making films, if not by putting out ideas and experiences that we have lived through and contemplated in the present and in the long term. We must believe in our projects even when confronted with antagonistic forces. I believe that we must also listen to the voice inside us, to not be afraid to make alliances and to create our own context in order to be able to express ourselves while facing the obstacles. Each context and each person also changes as time goes by, and it is difficult for me to know how I would act today if I were in the same situation as in 2009, during the Iranian elections, for example. We cannot calculate everything, and even less so control what happens around us, but we can remain faithful to our principles and to a certain ethic in our methods. I think that we can at least be sure of not losing the essential: our beliefs, our passion, and our attention, which allow us to practice creativity and to combat oppression, in whatever forms it comes in. In the end, silence is always worse than speaking out and suffering the consequences.

Paris-Mexico, 2013-2015.

Translated by Brad Stevens and revised by Bani Khoshnoudi.

Bani Khoshnoudi's website: http://www.penseesauvagefilms.com

* René Parize, « Savoir de soumission ou savoirs de révolte ? L'exemple du Creusot », in Jean Borreil (dir.), *Les sauvages dans la cité. Auto-émancipation du peuple et instruction des prolétaires au XIXe siècle*, Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1985, pp. 91-103.