



IN YOUR FACE

In 1984, Ahmad Tabrizi was in his second year of Comparative Literature at Tehran University. His goal was a PHD in Persian Literature and a teaching career. He had begun to explore the relationship in exile between poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud and the parallels found in the forty-day seclusion of Šams-al-Din Tabrizi, a weaver, embroiderer and mystic, and Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the Sufi poet, jurist, and theologian. The literary works resulting from these intimate, shared displacements are devotional discourses of love and longing. For Rimbaud, 'A Poet makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses.' For Šams-al-Din Tabrizi, the senses are not the proper subject of poetry: it is rather the discovery of the world. What ties them together, however, is an excess of imagistic, impassioned expression that knows no restraint.

Ahmad Tabrizi's involvement in the student movement leading up to the Iranian Revolution led to his flight from Iran, when Khomeini's return from exile resulted in a betrayal of the promise of democracy. Tabrizi went first to Pakistan, then India and Japan before destroying his ID and landing in Vancouver in 1987, seeking asylum. Farsi, a language in which each word articulates the 900-year history of its use, was supplanted by his need to learn English, which by his comparison is a 'language of manuals'. Muted for a time, his means of expression became those by which he began to earn his living: costume design for film and theatre combined with a parallel practice in performance and mixed media that often contains references to Persian poetry and music.

In this exhibition, *Crossed*, thirty-eight framed photographs are arranged in a partial grid formation. In a repeated format, the warmly lit eyes of the artist are pictured behind cool white panels incised with circular cutouts. Heaped dressmaking pins surround the eyes in a wreath that reads, cartoon-like, as a hair and beard, or the prickly outline of a 'happy face'. Within the series, the eyes' expression changes from alarm, to suspicion, to recognition in reaction to our gaze. Beneath the layer of pins, Farsi script tilts diagonally, while English words are rendered on top of the photograph, in dripping red cursive placed where a mouth should be.

As a whole, the arrangement – like a crossword puzzle, a storyboard or a comic strip – is a rational system in which the eyes of the artist are seemingly trapped behind scrims or doors. The scrawled English writing is familiar, like a 'slasher' film poster, yet refers to the ostracizing practice of marking the door of a shamed individual, quarantined by illness or shunned for their crime or religion. Written in 'blood', these words are not the marks of a vandal, but are the artist's own, forming phrases. 'Foreign... fruit... taste... like... exile' scrolls vertically while 'foreign... fruit... lighten up... FAG' stretches on the horizon. 'Brownie' is the subject at the far left, 'beholder... displacement... taste... another... failure' creating an incomplete, bitter sentence that skips across the entire composition. 'Deep down... it's just... another... surface' and 'another... failure' form a crossroads reading down and across. Layers of absurdity, camp, threat and poignancy all compete for singular attention here. Disorganized, the senses of the viewer are compressed between the space of the photograph, the sparkly pins, the calligraphy and the violently rendered words that oscillate between insult and lament.

In an accompanying video, Tabrizi's voice speaks what at first seems to be a translation of the Persian poem that someone is singing in the background, in the classical style. In the Persian literary tradition, code words were used to sidestep the censors: the sun is the revolution; the night is the repressive regime. The singing voice tells of the cycle of uprising – the excited anticipation of the dawn, the full light of noon, the sliding back into the monstrous night and then the refrain: 'bright days are coming'...

Hiding again beneath the marked door, Tabrizi's eyes dart as he speaks out loud his observations of the Occupy Vancouver camp of five years ago:

"This crowd will never unite; this crowd enjoys its differences far greater than its cause, this crowd has no cause but its differences." Spoken from the margins of the encampment, his is initially a distanced view: *"This crowd is too afraid of its loneliness... so lonely in its togetherness."* Not knowing what to do, the occupiers go their separate ways, and Tabrizi's subject moves from 'they' to 'we': *"and yet again our enemy becomes our leader."* With failure and betrayal inevitable, the nuanced condition of being alone yet together is the only apparent or lasting cause.

Never fully revealing himself, Tabrizi confronts us with only glimpses of his eyes and fragments of his voice. Through looking and speaking, he occupies a nexus of longing and refusal. His skeptical dismissal of the intense, impassioned connection of political camaraderie slices across an intimate experience, an embodied displacement, a shared difference that tastes, that itches, deep down.

Lorna Brown, Writer
November 2014

To Ahmad...

In an interview by Jada Stark in *Terminal City* magazine, "My Coffee with Ahmad" (2005), Ahmad Tabrizi responds to the last question, "What are you working on now?"

"So I am just working on a bunch of different shit. I don't know. I'm just me. I'm just a nonentity that's still alive. I feel like liquid. I don't want to take on a solid form. I don't like to be called a designer or an artist or a janitor. I'm all of those things and I'm none of those things."

Yes, Ahmad Tabrizi is a difficult persona to define, because he refuses to be 'categorized'. However (whether he likes or not) I can think of nothing more appropriate than calling him a poet. To be honest, I have never read any of his poems in text because Ahmad writes in Farsi, his native tongue, and I unfortunately cannot read his language. Ahmad also said that the poem is untranslatable. I agree. So he doesn't share with me his 'real' poem. Instead, I read his poem in different visual forms – such as the artwork in this exhibition, *Crossroad/Crosswords*.

Crossed (Crossroad/ Crosswords) is all about his new form of poetry, written beyond the languages. A few clues – English words set in a crossword puzzle – form a frame. His eyes gaze from small holes in a baby-blue smiley face. We are invited to imagine what he is reciting to us.

I imagine Ahmad's long journey from his home Teheran in 1984. I imagine the landscapes of his journey and his life in different places. I imagine his thousands of encounters with different people. I imagine him sitting in a chair thinking of his home, family and friends. I imagine his anger and confusion in everyday life through this unwished-for journey. Someone like me, who has never been through revolution, massacre, dictatorship, and extreme devastation in my own country, cannot picture the images that he has seen and will never forget. I can't fully understand his pain, but I can feel it through his poetry. Imagining his pain is actually not a negative feeling. Rather, it makes me feel truthful for being human, and grateful that he shares such real things with me. The poetry has a power beyond its language. While not truly translatable, it captures my mind and takes me somewhere deeper and more unpredictable. It is such a pleasure to be opened, to feel someone else's deep thoughts.

Fleeing from Iran and finally settling in Canada, Ahmad's life is in a constant double language situation. It is somewhat the same for me, but I am not a political refugee. I voluntarily left my homeland, Japan, and immigrated to Canada. When I want to describe to someone complex feelings and thoughts, I am always bewildered with loneliness, sadness, discomfort, anger, fury, confusion, hesitation – as well as joy, excitement, and gratitude. I still think in my native language, and try to translate the feeling into another language. Living in the foreign place, this is the everyday reality that we have to get accustomed to. I think the majority of immigrants share the same frustrating in-between-ness states of feeling. We have to be aware that the meaning is construed through a lot of misunderstanding. There is no choice. We use what we know to survive. As immigrants from another culture, we have to accept the dilemma that understanding each other through a second language is fundamentally impossible, and communicate with an assumption of misunderstanding. Ahmad and I use English as our common language. Our friendship has developed through linguistic limitations and assumed misunderstanding. We know the limit of language, but we also know that something can go beyond language. I love Ahmad's ability to convey a deep message with such a personal poetic form, invented through his life experience.

Whether he likes or not, I want to call Ahmad a poet.

Makiko Hara, Independent Curator
December 2014

Crossed by Ahmad Tabrizi

January 15 – February 21, 2015

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, JANUARY 15 (7pm–10pm)

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