

PHG

Presentation House Gallery

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AKBAR NAZEMI

Unsent Dispatches from the Iranian Revolution, 1978 - 1979

The Gallery is a public cultural facility operated by the British Columbia Photography and Media Arts Society, a federally registered charity.

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Questions about the value of 'culture' and more specifically, the value of 'art' abound, even during a revolution. What is contemporary art in the revolutionary context? Of what value is art for the sake of art when one's society is either crumbling or being transformed?

Akbar Nazemi's photographs of the Iranian Revolution were made at substantial personal risk. He was an active participant, making images during the day and processing film or distributing communications by night. He carried a wind-up 16mm Bolex with him every day, switching from still cameras to motion pictures for particularly significant events.

Photographs, including Nazemi's, can have an enormous impact on our perceptions of both revolution and war. During the struggle, and as soon as victory is declared, effort is directed at controlling the story to be told. Throughout history, war and revolution have been presented after the fact in over-simplified myths: glorious acts of heroism, accounts of enemies routed and emblematic horror stories of innocent victims who 'lost everything'. Contradictory evidence is often eliminated or denied.

The invention of photography made this reductive process of simplification and denial far more difficult to sustain. Photography has the capacity to bring myth back to reality, or it did so prior to the digital age. The unaltered photograph is perhaps our most potent transmitter of the complex realities that de-romanticize the political violence of wars and revolutions. The power of photography to alter perceptions, beliefs and opinions was a lesson taught in the Vietnam War, known in Vietnam as the American War, and recent examples from around the world today confirm photography's power.

The rhythms and patterns of the street are the formal link between revolutions and non-revolutionary street photography, which has long

had the graininess of its emulsion act as a signifier of the grittiness of street life itself. Graininess has had a long historical association with photographs that are 'tough' to make. The closer to 'the street' the photographer is, the more acceptable it is that the resulting images are grainy, gritty and, in the case of Akbar Nazemi's images, virtually decomposing after being stored in a wide variety of imperfect storage sites. Not only grain and grit are shared. The randomness of urban life – the varied patterns of building facades and human motion – show up in both the daily urban routine and in the non-quotidian revolutionary moment. Photography, freezing the moment, can reveal what no eventual winner of a revolution will acknowledge – the random quality of the events leading up to the outcome.

In Akbar Nazemi's case much of this tell-tale grain results from the difficulty of obtaining goods and services during a revolution. Where does one purchase film when the shops are all closed? Where do you process film shot during the day if you want to exhibit the prints the next day as part of the 'news' that was posted at the university? How do you do this when soldiers are watching, processing in daytime is not possible and there is a curfew at night? Nazemi shot on out-of-date film, with 35mm motion picture film stock, on films made by many different manufacturers and processed his film in conditions and chemistry that were far from ideal. The survival of his negatives is in some ways as remarkable as the survival of revolutionary ideals themselves – there are many challenges in both areas.

In Iran, once the revolutionary force gained momentum in the autumn of 1978, virtually all of Tehran was out on the streets. In this exhibition we can witness the day-to-day progress of public dissent that culminated in one the more significant political upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century. This exhibition depicts demonstrations, protestors, streets, sloganeering, violence and ultimately the jubilation that was shared by those revolutionaries who survived, both men and women. It also depicts what many would want to deny – that this particular revolution was very broad-based and, at the moment the Shah's government capitulated, very much a collective effort that could not legitimately be claimed by any single group as their own victory.

This exhibition of Akbar Nazemi's photographs is curated by Pantea Haghighi and Bill Jeffries. This text is adapted from the curators' essays in the exhibition catalogue.

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