CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

An interview with Vali Mahlouji

By Alina Belishkina, Vera Kavaleuskaya, Vanessa Kowalski, Elina Nikkanen
Vali Mahlouji is a London-based curator and writer, who, among other things, founded the research, curatorial and educational platform *Archaeology of the Final Decade (AOTFD)* in 2010. The focus of this platform is to challenge and confront fixed histories through a radical re-contextualisation of cultural and artistic materials that have remained obscure, endangered, banned or in some instances destroyed. The platform’s work brings international attention to cultural artefacts, which have been neglected due to historical circumstances, and encourages the reintegration of these materials into cultural memory. Recirculation of these previously under-exposed materials, banned and erased from the cultural memory in the name of institutionalised censorship, is intended to fill in the emerged gaps in both history and art history. *AOTFD*’s materials have so far been acquired by Tate Modern, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris,
Currently there are two core projects within this platform: The Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts, Shiraz—Persepolis 1967-77 and Recreating the Citadel: Kaveh Golestan, Prostitute 1975-77, which manifest deleted narratives and shed light on potential futures of pre-revolutionary Iran.

The first project, Festival of Arts, Shiraz—Persepolis 1967-77, is dedicated to the festival of performing arts, held annually in Shiraz and Persepolis from 1967 to 1977. Experimental and radical, it existed as a platform for transnational exchange between South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, the Caucuses, Latin America, North and sub-Saharan Africa, the United States and Europe; and thus worked towards the deconstruction of the idea of Western cultural dominance. The festival was declared ‘decadent’ by Ayatollah Khomeini, who came to power as the result of the revolution, and all materials related to the festival were officially banned.

The second project, Recreating the Citadel, explicates the story of the red light ghetto of Tehran named the Citadel of Shahr-e No. The photo series Prostitutes by Kaveh Golestan, portraying the residents of this district from 1975 to 1977, is displayed alongside the archive of research, which addresses the processes of formation and destruction of the Citadel. Ten days before the revolution triumphed over the preceding regime, the Citadel was set on fire; and those who were trapped inside, tragically died in flames. This erasure and censorship, both of physical space and its preserved memory, cultivate a sense of cultural amnesia which resonates to this day.

We spoke with Mahlouji about his AOTFD project to address the poetics and politics of archival practice.
As an entry point to our conversation we propose to use the analogy of fire as both a reference to the actual narrative of one of your projects, and as a metaphor for the archival practice as seen from a broader perspective.

There is a Japanese aphorism which says: "Fire doesn’t burn fire!," meaning that fire can and will burn everything that can be burned, but the one thing fire cannot burn is fire itself. Fire cannot exist in self-enclosure, and thus must extend from its flame into the surrounding field. That is, fire comes into existence when it enters what it is not. Now, if we compare its ontology to that of the archive, we can see how they both have the potential to grow vertically, horizontally and yet obliquely, and similarly maintain a position of inclusion and exclusivity.

Perhaps we can begin here and posit our burning question of whether you see the practice of building (or re-building) the archive, as something that sets up the fire- that is, as a gesture that simultaneously brings the fire to life, and reveals the surroundings which are affected by it?

I engage in a forensic excavation into areas of culture and art that have remained dark and obscure, removed from access and knowledge, banned or destroyed. When focusing on very particularly obscure art objects or cultural phenomena, I first excavate them horizontally to recirculate them into consciousness and then I investigate horizontally, in a Foucauldian sense, to extrapolate contextually.
The impulses and intentions behind excavating and extrapolating contextually are not satisfied unless they can disrupt usual markers, subvert, undermine and question narratives, borders, boundaries. Mere recovery of an archive of history seems quite futile to me—perhaps is an act of nostalgia, which is even problematic in terms of my practice. Where I intend to militate and activate, nostalgia passivates. Militating against amnesia and erasure must be performed as obliquely political exercises in the present. Forensic intentions must go beyond the point of recovery, beyond the intentions embodied in the object and its conditions of emergence to a present that is directly or indirectly informed or influenced by it.

We may ask whether it is possible to simultaneously deploy these recovered objects to puncture a status quo, activate them as supplements that dismantle the whole in order to create that fire. To puncture, to disrupt historical narratives, historical conditioning is the question of the *Archaeology of the Final Decade (AOFID)*. The curatorial methods and process is bifurcated; the, curatorial drive is dual. To re-integrate and to reconcile the art or cultural object, is only meaningful if can be deployed to set up that fire.

If we can now think of a curator as an arsonist, as someone who sets up the fire, or re-circulates suppressed narratives, how can we further understand a curator’s role or agency within the context of an exhibition? Is it really possible to curate an activation?

Aspects of my curatorial practice involve themselves, primarily but not exclusively, with issues pertaining to power, radical democracy, conflict, activism, and art and cultural projects that evince social and political commitment. Curating is really at the centre of my practice. During my lecture as a part of the CuMMA discourse series, I mentioned that
I am not working as an archivist, but rather am making installationary exhibitions, which include constructed archives—specifically chosen and juxtaposed documents, papers, audiotapes, videotapes, objects, photographs, art objects, art artifacts etc. This intentional choreography is designed to elicit knowledge and affect.

The project, the curating, is about unfixing, releasing and reactivating moments of history, re-activating a relationship to a past moment of history in a Walter Benjaminian way\(^2\). This requires meticulous targeting of specific historical moments that enable a flash moment of connection to the present. It is important to dispel with historical linearity, and to think in *messianic time*\(^3\) as Benjamin called it. We can actually re-activate something from the past which flashes meanings at us today. So this business of articulating it today, or enunciating it today is very, very important.

Why and how are we doing it today? And how do we curate this assembled archive?

The exhibitions of *AOTFD* are fragmented as you have different elements of history, politics, society, legislation, gender issues, art objects, documents, and there are these small texts which speak to an idea in a very particular way and for very particular intentions. They are not simply descriptive, they are thematic, raising themes and raising questions, and often more than just questions, which embolden us to actually be a bit a polemical and claim things, say things.

In general, there is choreography involved in the way of curating an assembled fabricated archive. It can also be similar to editing a film or a play. Beyond the content, the colour and tempo can be regulated with mechanisms of humour, emphasis or digression, displacement, association. Flashes and intentional punches are made prominent in relational terms through the constellation.

Satisfaction comes from methods of performing, animating and puncturing the constellation that go beyond factual historical.

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3 Ibid.
Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but also their zero-hour [Stillstellung]. Where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it yields a shock to the same, through which it crystallizes as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he cognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour [Stillstellung] of events, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past⁴.

"WALT ER BEN JAMIN, ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY"

4 Ibid.
Militating through the archive is an act of resistance. I wouldn’t call it poetical. What does it mean to be poetical? I treat the material with utmost respect and sensitivity but I do not rely on being poetical. I do tend to create a personal relationship with the material. I do not insist on maintaining a distance from them. Indeed I tend to situate my personal experiences where relevant in direct link to the historical spaces I excavate. If poetry is heightened through metaphor and attaining the hyper-real, the curatorial work is actually primarily about staying very, very real.

Can your projects be considered as acting as through a poetic response, one that functions as an act of resistance? Is there a possibility of justice wherein all interpretations of the archive can, in a sense, ‘win?’

Speaking about reality, a traumatic one in particular: Where do you see the concrete relation between trauma and the archive? Can we understand your project as an attempt to re-enact trauma within an exhibition setting?

I do not know if that is possible. Is it possible to re-enact trauma? Is it relevant or meaningful to re-enact trauma? Re-enactment of trauma seems to me to entail spilling blood, or re-performing an act of violence. It is not re-enacting a trauma, but rather, a re-visiting of the site of trauma.

We can be sure that these cultural landscapes are spaces that have been exposed to objective, subjective and systemic violences of the durational type. As we shall see with our two case studies these objects of target would have usually been inherently spaces of richness even before violation. That richness rendered them vulnerable to destruction, to erasure—someone has decided they are not good for us. These spaces
represent micro ecologies of trauma that hold condensed zip files of information—ready to be unlocked. They are subterranean sites are ripe for excavation.

Curatorially, I intentionally design a specifically choreographed archive of information. By this I mean that while some institutions regard my research as archival, there is often actually not an archive there to start off with. The strategy I deploy allows institutions, especially public art institutions to relate to it formally and conceptually as an archive. But these do not physically exist as a collection or a mass of information in any given space. They are chosen and designed with specific intentions in mind. Here, again Walter Benjamin’s idea of the *monad*, the flash moment, really speaks to me in—how a past is enunciated in the now. It is also very important to be aware of what is articulated through this enunciation and what you intend to explore and emphasise. Subsequently, we can consider how does curating facilitate that emphasis, how does curating facilitate the transference of particular knowledge and information, a relationship to history in a way that makes sense of our existence today. It may not be a global or universal relationship to how we exist and function today but is at least related to a particular context.

This specific enunciation, in your case, happens within the context of exhibition. What kind of experience with this fragmented and incomplete narration within the exhibition space do you aim to create for an audience?

In the way of curating, here the exhibition is the artwork. Let’s also mention that every exhibition is by definition unfinished, limited—many ideas, objects and questions remain untapped. This inherent limitation would be, and should be, made obvious to the viewer. Let us remember first, before we talk about audience, that there is a necessary ‘unfixity,’ an unfinished quality to curating.
Let’s think about *Recreating the Citadel* which investigates the nature and function of cultural deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation as a tool of political and cultural reordering of society in post-1979 revolutionary Iran. It specifically relates to issues of gender and the politics of totalitarianism. The exhibition excavates the historical, social and political landscape of the former red-light district of pre-revolutionary Tehran, the Citadel of Shahr-e No. *AOTFD* unearths archival and artistic objects to present the history of the district from its emergence in the 1920s, through to its final politically motivated destruction and erasure in 1979, focusing in particular on the years between 1965-1980. The exhibition investigates the interrelationships between systemic violence, mechanisms of cultural control, and historical amnesia through tracing the history of the district of Shahr-e No.

*Recreating the Citadel*’s stream of historical narratives mobilises archival material focusing on the multivalent intersections of art, society, feminism, law and religion during 1960-80s Iran. This emerges through a tapestry of photographs, diaries, maps, newspaper clippings, film documentaries and audio interviews. In its totality, the exhibition depicts a fascinating and complex social and political history culminating in the revolutionary deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of the urban district and culture at large. Kaveh Golestan’s seminal series *Prostitute*, the last extant visual documents of the district and its residents forms the core of the exhibition. *AOTFD* excavated the series, which had only been exhibited for fourteen days in 1978 and never seen again and toured them in this exhibition across museums in Europe.

The core artistic object—the portraits by Golestan—activate the history and vice versa. This is achieved through the careful placement of fragmented historical information that unfix the artwork from fixed meaning and context. Golestan himself never would have intended the series to be limited to a new story. First of all he considered them a
work of portraiture. And in my view the series constitutes the strongest photographic study of femaleness produced in the second half of the twentieth century in Iran. He mean to use them as a political call to action. He worked along the interface between the marginal and the mainstream, as an interlocutor on the side of the marginal. He created the possibility of seeing between citizens by exposing those kept out of sight. The plight of the women and the district however were never fixed in the two year period between 1975 to 1977. The district was torched by mobs, an undisclosed number of residents died in the fire, the district was later bulldozed flat, and subsequently turned into a park with no signs and physical evidences of the violence left to be witnessed. This totalitarian act of cleaning has obvious connections with a wider project of history which I will not go into here. However, the complicated and deeply traumatic history serves as a mirror to a wider historical experience. Now in curating the relationships between art, violence, history, shared experiences of citizens one needs to create associations, puncture history, highlight events and release affect.

The artwork itself needs to expand beyond the limits of original intentions and contexts, has to be rendered unfixed and unfinished. Curating here wants to destabilise its nature in a way that it remains always unfinished, no longer fixed in a time and a place. In relation to the conceiving the exhibition as a whole this unfinishedness and 'unfixity' becomes a core strategy—curated meanings and association are dependent upon that which is included and that which is excluded from the constellation. I have chosen to focus on the destruction, violence inflicted sand the epic totalitarian gesture of removing all evidence and memory of the inflicted violence—a totalising project at the core of a much wider national historical reterritorialisation.

Does this unfinishedness within the exhibition space create a dialectical relationship to the exhibition: this
It is not as vague. When we look at the portraits taken between 1975 and 1977 of the residents of the red light district we know that they were produced by the photographer for a very particular set of reasons, which he subsequently articulated in three photo essays he published in a daily newspaper. The photo essays (the project was in fact a commission for the newspaper *Ayandegan*) raise awareness about a marginalized community that lived ‘freely’, within the constraints of a ghetto, liberally accepted and yet obviously hugely exploited. By putting his finger on the plight of the dispossessed and the marginal communities within society, Golestan was activating awareness of a social issue and he was using this as a form of political agitation in the face of a censorial, autocratic system that limited free or direct political debate or action. Now what happened a year later after he published them, under the guise of revolution, the area is burnt down in a very epic gesture. The fire consumed cinemas, cabarets, taverns, and drinking houses and alcohol stores and beer factories. It consumes a wide sway of popular culture—all of which it deems to erase. It marks the initiation of a very totalizing cultural attitude that remains imposed to date.

Three of the female residents were executed in the summer of 1979 marking the initiation of executions of women by the revolutionary courts paving the way for those to follow. So this weight, historical weight, social weight, political weight, which is carried and embodied by these portraits, is now far beyond the original intentions.

Artworks never have to be fixed. I am conscious of the strategies of inclusion and exclusion of markers. That is the nature of the constellation—otherwise it is a merely a photographic exhibition. I have never exhibited the *Prostitute* series as isolated photographs, and fortunately I have been able to attract institutional interest in precisely this kind of installationary, juxtapositional exhibition.
What kind of affective response do you aim to create, and is it possible to distinguish between creating an affect and manipulating?

Let us first deconstruct manipulation, what does it mean?
“To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger."
Manipulation would consist of having a certain agenda, and then having this agenda structuring, or speaking to the public through it.

How is any action devoid of an agenda?

Perhaps there is no way to avoid it. The question is how it is implemented within the curatorial gesture?

I am not sure if anything we do can be devoid of agenda, devoid of a drive, devoid of an intention, even my most mundane actions. I cannot imagine anything we write, do, think, or say is devoid of agenda in that sense. We should refer back to revisiting history in that Benjaminian way, to embody it with significance and importance, shedding light on a particular moment. But first you need to decide upon which particular moment or particular item or artefact that you want to shed light on, and then the question of curating becomes about how to activate, and can we curate the mode in which these works will be activated?

How do I, in that way, in the Benjaminian way, embody that object as a historical monad, how do I take those portraits of the late 70’s and re-embody them? For me, relating to history, understanding history wants to perform a messianic connection with that object.

In terms of agenda, the core agenda is the attempt to re-embody the object as a historical monad. The agenda is locating a particular moment, particular art work and then extracting from particular meanings that are historically significant. That is the agenda. It becomes a practice in itself and I would call it an attempt to draw historical meaning. That would be the agenda and the 'practice' would be a better word than 'manipulate.'

It becomes a question of how to put it into practice and how to make it work in practice. If we do not choose effective strategies, we begin to become didactic or imposing. What is very, very important in this work
is being aware of the elements you are juxtaposing, the information that you are revealing.

I can give you very clear examples of that—how you remain constantly conscious of particular intentions while simultaneously ensuring not to fix things. There needs to be a balance between the two.

In the case of the *Prostitute* series I chose not to directly interfere with the artwork itself, exhibiting the photographic portraits uninterrupted. I have not appropriated the portraits and have made a point of not doing that. The documentary and historical material exist in a parallel stream. I do not take artistic liberties over the original artworks, aiming not to aesthetically overpower the art object.

Is it possible to curate and set up this archive which exists autonomously from the political and social context in which it was deeply embedded?

I think that we ought to clarify: What I have spoken about is within the context of the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis* and specifically about the landscape of that festival, aesthetically and politically.

I have written about the temporary autonomous zone within which the *Festival of Arts* operated during the decade between 1967 and 1977. I am referring to the conscious strategies the festival sophisticatedly constructed in order to operate on its own terms, beyond the aesthetic and political conventions of its time. Aesthetically, it engaged with meta-theatrical devices that were beyond the conventional theatre, exerting an autonomy against or beyond post Renaissance European conventions, in favour of democratising across time, space and geography, delving into ritual, magic, and older traditions which allowed for the inclusion of Asian and African expressions. *The Festival* aimed at autonomy from distinctions of stage and audience. It sought political autonomy outside geopolitical demarcations of the time, aimed at aspirations
of universalisms, beyond boundaries, beyond traditions, beyond languages, beyond regions.

It also operated meta-politically beyond the political dogmas prevalent across the intellectual polity of Iran, most particularly an explicit engagement with anti-Imperialist slogans. The Festival functioned meta-theatrically and meta-politically as an aesthetic space. It failed to engage explicitly with the questions of anti-Imperialism, nationalism, and national sovereignty which were central concerns of a sizeable portion of the intellectual polity in Iran. And of course, when talking about a temporary autonomous zone, one is highlighting the fact that it could only function for a finite period of time—ten days or two weeks annually. It aspired to be a heterotopian, heterogenous unity of disunity during a finite period of time.

Its temporary autonomy is also evident in the liberal stage that it enabled in spite of the restrictive and conservative local cultural and political terrain. Censorship was not imposed on the space. The directors of the festival very much protected the liberal landscape of the festival beyond the reach of the censor. What I have referred to as a temporary autonomous zone is only in that context. I am not claiming any autonomy other than that.

However if we are speaking about autonomy in the context of our curatorial work, we need to articulate the specific mechanisms we deploy for the dismantlement of a set of realities we that we aim to oppose. Autonomy in the AOTFD projects really means autonomy from fixed narratives. Erasure necessitates reterritorialization; reterritorialization is the conscious replacement of previous contexts and associations with new given sets of appropriated totalising ones. A close glance at AOTFD’s method confirms that the documentary and textual punctuations are strictly factual—juxtapositions of selected information that elucidate and enunciate.

What we have to militate against are those amputations, erasures, cleansings, totalizings of cultural spaces, which succeed to significant
extent in creating vacuums of experiences, knowledges, connectivities, possibilities and freedoms.

I think that freedoms to dream and to be poetic come from re-lighting a fire of aspirations, of hopes and of desires.
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is a London-based curator, founder of Archaeology of the Final Decade, independent advisor to the British Museum and director of Kaveh Golestan Estate. Mahlouji’s recent work includes exhibitions at Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Whitechapel Gallery, Photo London, Prince Claus Fund, Singapore International Festival of Arts, Art Dubai Modern, Bergen Triennial and Open Eye Gallery. Tate Modern has dedicated a room in its permanent collection—a first for an Iranian artist—for exhibiting materials from Vali Mahlouji’s project Recreating the Citadel alongside Kaveh Golestan’s Prostitute series from August 2017. AOTFD’s A Utopian Stage at Whitechapel Gallery was nominated for Best Exhibition (Alternative) 2015 by the Global Fine Arts Awards.

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