

Mehrdad Afsari has once again focused on the nature of photo and photography, something he has professionally worked on for many years and reflected in the majority of his works. His professional works on this covers a wide spectrum from the pictures of the buildings and panoramas evading in the margins to show the presence of a camera lens (Photography as a Myth, 2005), to the pixelated photos of The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb (The frenzied heart of mine, Houses the passionate countenance of thine, 2009) and the motionless shots in his videos challenging the border between photography and film (No News in Iran, 2011). All these show how far the photo itself is restricted in registering the reality. His works tempt us to think about the photo as a media rather than paying attention to what going on before the lens.

Afsari in his recent collection, "The gradual disappearance of things" highlights the issue of the authenticity of photo in contrast with reproducibility. In this collection, there are 36 color photos from 36 panoramas or colorful internal atmospheres. These photos have been taken since 10 years ago and new photos have been added to show the course of evolution. Now, we face 36 photos that – of course – lack importance in subject (behind the camera model). This is because this time each panorama has been presented in 36 negatives. The frames are inside very small contacts repetitions of which constitute the entire image inside the frame. This 36-frame contact is indeed the result of 6-10 seconds of repeated photography and it is so difficult to distinguish the time differences since the subject of photography is motionless. Each 36-frame contact has been reproduced in 36 frames and they have covered a large area on the wall of the gallery. There are then, 36 frames on sale. These 36 pictures make a total of 46656 small frames (36 x 36 x 36). The selection of 36 that is repeated in all levels of the exhibition is intentional, because it is a significant figure for the photographers.

Finally, the 36-frame negatives have been installed beside the 36-photo frames with a price tag of the same price of the photo collection. The entire exhibition is made of small repeated frames that make it difficult for the viewer to distinguish the subject of the photos. Thus it makes the viewer to focus on the repetition and reproduction of the photos rather than the subject matter in them and consider the endless capacity for reproduction of photos. It seems there is a vague footprint of the reality recorded in picture because the media has been turned into a subject itself from the media between the subject and picture.

The collection of photos emphasize the distance between picture and reality, possessing only limited signs of reality. The distance from the palpable reality and no access to it through representation is associated with smallness of the frames on one hand, and by emphasizing on uniqueness of each contact frame on the other hand. The entire 36-frame contact seems to be a fixed and repeated picture although it has been taken in few seconds. The false conception of the oneness of all frames reveals the inability of the general viewer (non-photographer) to distinguish the differences, thus it makes a distinction between our understanding of the subject matter and the real performance of the camera. Such artifice comes to light only when it is known that

registration of any moment – however short in time – is not repeatable and returnable and that there will be no type-identity relationship between the moments on frame (for instance two-tenth of second in the case of the frames).

Whatever seems to be fixed and symmetric in appearance is indeed a combination of 36 different and modal moments from the viewpoint of time. It is obvious that the photographer's intention behind selecting a motionless subject has brought about such contradiction between our sensual conception and reality. Therefore, the ratio between human understanding and shot by shot registration of reality shall not be one to one and transparent – something that approves inaccessibility of reality and the contradiction between the images of finished past and the present.

Perhaps the framing and reproduced frames attract the viewer in the first glance in this exhibition and associate Walter Benjamin's controversial discussion on losing authenticity of a work of art by photographic reproducibility. Whatever remaining from reality is nothing other than small worthless images and their reproduction, be it printed frames of negatives or repetition of them in frames, seems to be the subject matter of the exhibition. Moreover, the negatives themselves have been put on sale to let reproduction continue freely out of the monopoly of the artist. These are the things shifting our mind toward Benjamin's essay.

Here, I deem it necessary to expound more about Benjamin's essay based on which I would like to study Afsari's photos. With respect to these associations and the impact that the artist says he has taken from Benjamin's work, there comes a question into my mind that how efficient and coming is such association between the content of the exhibition and Benjamin's thoughts on art in analyzing it?

Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" that was published in 1936 emphasizes losing uniqueness of the work of art by the advent of the new media in modern times. The invention of photography and cinema, as Benjamin asserts, brought about easy reproduction of the works of art that on one hand depreciated the authenticity on uniqueness of the artwork and on the other hand, led to the generalization of the art. Such an incident taking place for the first time in human history, is concurrent with the growth in bourgeoisie in mid-19th century Europe that signals the passage from the artwork as cult. The recent phenomenon is paradoxically based on the elitist school of "Art for Art's Sake" and emphasizes on independence of art from its previous functions based on an aesthetic school of thought, while reinforcing its "dramatic value".

Therefore, such development that accordingly has laid the foundations of modern art from Mallarmé onward faces invention of the first tool that is reproductive in its real sense: photography. Whatever pleasing and promising for Benjamin is the linear relationship between producing and consuming artworks, something that happened after the new invention and elimination of the border between the original work and the reproduced copy. In other words, Benjamin believes that technological development in new age will restore the social function of art and will realize its popularity.

Today, some 80 years after publication of his essay, Benjamin's theory has been paid attention by the art theorists and sociologists for three decades. Without going into an in-depth analysis of his theory, it is necessary to have a glance at the historical background of Benjamin's idea and his prospects for the nature of art in future in order to find a yardstick for evaluation of artworks. Benjamin who attributed the credibility of art to its ability in comprehensive promotion of social awareness and placed special emphasis on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, believed that the "genuine art" belongs to the past remaining a monopoly of hegemonic bourgeoisie relations.

Despite the fact that at the threshold of World War II there was the risk of confiscation of art by Fascism for politicization of aesthetics, and Benjamin was fully aware of it, he believed that the evolution of art must finally end in its accessibility. Therefore, as Castello Diarmuid asserts, Benjamin has double-edged response to the destruction of aura. Despite the complexity of the relationship between art and its social-political interaction, it can be ascertained in the case of Benjamin's idea that reproducibility of art is possible by photography (and cinema) as a way of taking art out of dramatic monopoly in modern period.

Since 1960s, the art movements challenged media orientation in parallel with dominant art institutions and Benjamin's essay was recovered to be used later in 1980s for clarification of postmodernism theory. Criticism on the authenticity of uniqueness and the persistence of artwork was association with questioning art display, distribution and training institutions. On the other hand, with the 1960s fall of the "abstract expressionism" and formalistic portrays of this school in the United States, the sociopolitical significance and interaction of art became popular in the United States and Europe. Reproducibility of art was increasingly paid attention by pop art and minimalist artists to challenge the authenticity based on skill, ingenuity and aesthetic forms. Putting aside the independent media and using camera-oriented arts questioned the media and institutionalized nature of superb arts. These can be all linked to and analyzed by what Benjamin opined as art. From Andy Warhol's silk-screen prints and Claes Oldenburg's "The Store" to the simple replicas of minimalist artists we can find attempts for questioning the uniqueness of artistic idea. We should of course take into mind that these activities were both displayed through art institutions and gained "dramatic value", and remained elitist minimally entering the social scene. These movements were welcome by some pioneer institutions and found their foothold very fast inside the dominant circles and categories of the art history.

Afsari's photographs might be classified as pop art reproduction in the first glance. The 36-frame negatives have been reprinted for 36 times. The photos lack photographic value in normal sense and the viewer faces reproduction of photos rather than the photos themselves. The only thing comparable to the pop artist works is the credit given to each one of 36 photos by the artist's signature. Half a century after the emergence of art movements paying attention to or criticizing authenticity in artwork production by introducing the concept of reproducibility, the works in this exhibition are

on display based on the same relations between the artist, institution, and dramatic value. Is this another emphasis on the failure of Benjamin's idea of the art without aura and populism of artwork? The photographer remains inside the gallery and in its socioeconomic norms despite losing the image itself and its aesthetic value by reproduction, or better say by considering its quality of form and challenging its pictorial presentation.

Another interesting aspect of this collection is putting on sale the negatives and contacts together. Although negatives are sold at a price equal to the entire collection of 36 frames, the possibility of its sales puts forward new issues. Without discussing the art movements and methods since 1960s and the commonality of audience-orientation in digital art and Internet, one can say this aspect of Afsari's decision is worthy of analysis in terms of new approaches challenging the role of art institutions and the authenticity of the artwork in a different and more serious way. It seems that the artist disclaims his right of ownership of the photos by selling their negatives. Upon possessing the negatives the proposed buyer will have the right to reproduce the photos in any size and form he wishes, although the artist says he has selected the subjects freely without having aesthetic considerations. Can the viewer organize an exhibition of the photos in his own style? If yes, on what title, himself or the original artist? Is Afsari paving the ground for ownership of his works and encouraging the audience to work in this line, although it is far from probability because of the high prices of the works? Irrespective of the end result (either negatives are sold, printed or displayed or not), the artist creates such a capacity to let his works live long and change nature unexpectedly. Perhaps this is the most controversial and noticeable aspect of this exhibition to question the authenticity of the artist and the artwork.

Mehrdad Afsari's photos tempt us to ponder upon the nature of reproduction in photography, reproducibility and authenticity of the artwork, and the name and right of the artist. These works, as it was mentioned earlier, arouse various layers of interpretation and necessitate contemplation on the nature of photography. However, all these go counter to Benjamin's utopia where he says mechanical reproduction is a superhighway for getting out of the circle of the relationship between capital, institution and art.

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