

Tensta konsthall

In 2011 Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi began a series of works which depart from two archives/collections of the 20th century. One is the collection of Western modern art from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art—a large collection that was inaugurated in 1977 together with the opening of the museum as part of the government's rapid modernization project in various fields, including culture. The other archive is that of the British Petroleum (BP) related to the company's origin in Iran from 1908 to 1951, when it found the first oil in the Middle East. This archive was produced simultaneously with the company's rapid growth in Iran as Britain's biggest foreign asset and the building of the city of Abadan for its employees.

The works they have been developing since 2011 do not simply display materials from the archives, but rather appropriate some of their features into new objects and images. **Two Archives** is one of the installations from this ongoing series of works which will be shown at Tensta konsthall. In returning to these two archives, the artists seek to retroactively enact an open-ended and indecisive

Melanchotopia, Witte de With Institute, Rotterdam, (2011); **Trust**, Media City Seoul, (2010); **The Isle**, MAK Center / Schindler house, Los Angeles, (2009); Documenta 12 magazine project, Kassel, (2007); and **Como viver junto**, 27th São Paulo Biennial, (2006). Currently they are Advising Researchers in fine art at the Jan Van Eyck Academy, Maastricht.
www.pagesproject.net

historiography of modernity. **Two Archives** is part of Tensta konsthall's program line which deals with archives, libraries and collections.

Self-Presentation

Tabatabai and Afrassiabi have been collaborating together under the name Pages since 2004, involving in various joint projects the publication of a bilingual magazine in Farsi and English. They are based in Rotterdam and work both in Iran and the Netherlands. Their projects and the magazine's editorial approach are closely linked, often beginning with addressing unresolved moments in the experience of modernity in Iran, which they re-articulate into reflections on contemporary art and artistic practice. Their work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions internationally, including: **Seep**, Chisenhale Gallery, London, (2013) and MACBA-Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona, (2012); **Prairies**, Les Ateliers de Rennes Biennial, Rennes, (2012); **Roundtable**, The 9th Gwangju Biennale, (2012), **Untitled** 12th Istanbul Biennial, (2011) **Two Archives**, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, (2011);

Sunday 17.3

14:00

The artists present their work in the exhibition.

Superimpose – Wooden and Steel Oil Derricks

(modeled after the first unsuccessfully tested oil well in 1902 and the first successfully tested oil well in 1908 in south-west Iran), 2011
Wood and painted brass
94 x 48 x 40

Five Paintings from the series 'Depot of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art', 2011-2012

Alkyd on canvas
Size variable

Untitled Object with Violet Curve

(modeled after the 1945 fan casing at the Abadan Refinery's engineering workshop, 1945), 2011
Cardboard and paint
65.2 x 72.2 x 56.2
41.5 x 73.8 x 57.9

Forth and Back – Knocking-off Time at the Refinery

(from original footage shot in 1921 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company depicting workers leaving the Abadan Refinery. Archive of the

A conversation between Nasrin Tabatabai, Babak Afrassiabi and Maria Lind

Maria Lind: What are the two archives which make up your project **Two Archives?** And how come you are working with them?

Babak Afrassiabi: One is the archive of the British Petroleum from when the company was active in Iran between 1908 and 1951. At the beginning the company was called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and then the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company before it was renamed British Petroleum. It began working in Iran when the first oil was found in the southwest of the country, which was also the first discovery of oil in the whole Middle East. This was the start of the oil industry and the building of the refinery in the city of Abadan and also the development of the city itself. Parallel to this the company created a very detailed archive of its own operation, of the developments and the whole process of modernisation in south-west Iran. In a way the BP archive tells a very peculiar story of modernisation in Iran. It was important for us to trace the

British Petroleum), 2011
DVD, black & white,
silent video 1' 29" loop

Dispute in Technicolor

(correspondence from November 1950 to March 1952 related to the making of **Persian Story**, a film produced by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company), 2011
Paper, color filter
139.5 x 81.7

Housing Abadan

(copy of the album: **Housing Abadan, Estates Management, Anglo Iranian Oil Company, Abadan, December 1950**. Archive of the British Petroleum), 2011
Print and photographs, linen, paper and cardboard

story of this archive to a more contemporary context and that's why we juxtapose it with the museum collection. It was interesting to see what kind of narrative of modernity can be extracted from in between these two archives. Not necessarily something that is limited to either of them, but what could be interpreted from this juxtaposition.

Nasrin Tabatabai: The western collection of the museum was gradually put together some years before the inauguration of the museum in 1977, right before the Islamic revolution. It was the first museum of contemporary art in Iran and the collection holds works by – for example Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol and Robert Smithson. In the beginning of the revolution the collection was withdrawn to the cellar and stayed there for about twenty years. Then part of it was public and was presented in exhibitions. Since then, every now and then the collection has been on view, but not with a particular plan or programming as you might see in museums all over the world.

ML: Was the putting away of the collection also connected with the fact that the wife of the Shah was very much involved with building the collection?

NT: It was more about the fact that it held contemporary Western art and that they didn't really know what to do with it. They knew that it is a valuable collection and it should be taken care of.

BA: In the early years of the revolution, the role of the museum and also the collection suddenly became very ambivalent and unclear. When we were talking with people who were working at the time in the museum they said that there were proposals to turn the museum into completely other usages

ML: You chose one archive from the industrial sector and the other one from the cultural sector, both archives developing into advanced forms. How come?

NT: In a place like Iran you can't see one without the other. The misplaced condition of the museum collection is linked to that of the BP archive. In some

ways the accumulation of the collection was the continuation of the same dream which is envisaged in the BP archive.

ML: According to you, what does your juxtaposition of the two archives say about modernity in Iran?

BA: It is important to keep in mind that both are in a way 'Western' archives and in any case an archive in the strict sense of the word is a western invention and obsession. With this juxtaposition in **Two Archives** – and the other works we're developing around them – we are implicitly suggesting that if there should be an archive faithful to the true experience of modernity in Iran, it could be traced in these two archives. But archives of course are never faithful. These in particular are politically and ideologically disputed archives. To begin with, this juxtaposition problematizes the fictions of each of these archives, the fiction of modernization (in the BP archive) and fiction of the contemporary (in the museum collection). What is more real here instead is maybe the collection in its withdrawal.

ML: Can you say something about the content of both archives: What is actually in the BP archive and in the collection of the museum?

NT: The BP archive is a meticulous registration of the company's operations in South West Iran. It includes photographs, industrial films, documents from the early days of search for oil and the making of the refinery in Abadan. Also it includes detailed information about the development of the city of Abadan into a company town. Plus lots of personal materials from BP's employees and their families, etc. The making of the archive was put to stop after the nationalization of oil in 1951 and with that the company had to leave Iran. It is now preserved in the UK.

ML: What about the collection?

NT: The collection holds works from the end of 19th century until the end of 1970s. It is a collection of western modern art starting with early modernists to American art from the 1970s, with works by many well-known artists.

ML: Is it known how they purchased these works?

NT: You often hear different stories about this, as if different people want to get credit for the purchases. But there have been obviously various in-between people from galleries and collections around the world who advised and suggested the art works to the museum. This is very clear from the vast collection of American art works from the 1970's. Some of the artists later became very famous which made the collection as valuable as it is today.

ML: What are the components which are on view in the space?

BA: One of the works is a sculptural piece, which is a superimposition of two oil derricks. One is modelled after the first 'unsuccessful' well dug in 1902, and by the way this is also how the well is titled and described in the BP archive. This means that no oil was found with this well. The other is called the 'first successful well' dating from 1908, which is the first well that did bring oil. We used photographs from the archive to model the derricks. This piece became the

starting point for **Two Archives**.

NT: In a way, we imagined our work or even the BP archive evolving in between these two oil wells. One unsuccessful and another one successful.

ML: What about the film?

NT: The film is from 1921 and it shows the workers leaving the factory in Abadan. Again we worked with superimposition, looping the film and superimposing the normal playback with the footage in reverse, so you see the workers neither leaving nor returning to the factory but suspended in the space in front of the factory gate.

BA: Which is neither the place of work nor home.

ML: Another component showing Abadan is the album with photographs of buildings in the city.

NT: The album is called **Abadan Housing** and we made an exact copy of it as it exists in the BP archive. The different housing in various areas in the city of

NT: While working with these two archives we didn't make a direct link between them. But by making these different objects or different references to these two archives, we somehow propose them to be seen as one archive, or as one being the extension of the other. In the end these objects are not really sculptures or paintings.

ML: There are indeed five paintings by you in the show, depicting the storage of the museum. You can recognise some paintings hanging at an angle on the racks.

NT: We were in fact copying these paintings but as they are inside the storage. The works in the collection are so detached from their original context that even the real works felt like copies.

BA: Everybody who studied art in Iran began knowing art by copying it, Nasrin and me too.

ML: The works being disconnected from their original context is almost like a mirror image of how art from beyond the Western world has ended up in the West, completely severed from their origin. How

Abadan follows the BP employees' difference in rank. The Album shows prototypes from different neighbourhoods, designed for factory workers, engineers, as well as the high rank employees. It shows how a city was envisioned, and divided by the company.

ML: What was the original purpose of the album?

BA: It's a systematic documentation and representation during and after the building process, including the actual plans of the homes.

ML: There is one more sculptural element, which is the fan casing, a sort of cover for the ventilation.

BA: The object is based on a photograph shot in one of the workshops in the refinery where they built among other things, such fan-casings. The original object is much larger than the one we built but it is formally based on that. For us it was more about formalising something between an industrial object and a minimalist sculpture.

do you relate to that?

NT: Do you mean works such as Islamic art, or ancient artifacts from different cultures? Although they are detached from their original context they never enter museums of contemporary art. I guess the issue of "contemporariness" gives another meaning to the works in the collection.

ML: I mean both premodern art and anthropological objects, as well as a lot of contemporary work. All of them tend to be decontextualised in locations far from their original locations.

BA: I think this question of context and the contemporary is a very complex one. What is interesting is that much of the non-western contemporary art find their place in art institutions in the west. But the opposite is not always the case. A contemporary western work of art has much more the chance of being misunderstood or decontextualized in much of the non-western world. This is maybe because the contemporary western discourses interpret and contextualize – rightly or wrongly – the contemporary non-western world.

ML: What does it mean for the project to be shown at Tensta Konsthall?

NT: Well, maybe practically I would say that we have never shown **Two Archives** in a setting like this particular space in Tensta, which has a theatrical quality. It is challenging to foresee how it effects the reception of the work.

ML: At the same time it is a passage. It's both transitional and theatrical.

BA: Because it is a passage it also can relate to the work in the sense that we never intended to present a total narrative of these two archives. It is something that is still undecided. This space maybe emphasises this intention.

ML: For me it is also interesting to show it here because it is a large population from the Middle East where the oil industry has obviously effected history and the development of the different countries and even caused war. Perhaps it has a special significance for some of the visitors that come here. That is one of the reasons why I like that it is precisely in this location –

people who only come for a coffee or to use the bathroom will actually be able to see the project or at least catch a glimpse of it.

ML: How does **Two Archives** relate to your magazine **Pages**; the bilingual journal – Farsi and English – that you have published for close to ten years?

NT: Since 2004, when we started publishing **Pages**, the subjects that we have been working with were addressed both through the magazine and our works. Specially in the last three issues of **Pages**, **Eventual Spaces, In Translation and When Historical**, we speak about the conditions of artistic practice in relation to history in general, and history of modernity and modernisation in Iran in particular. **Two Archives** naturally is a follow up of that, but at the same time it is the starting point for editing the upcoming issue of the magazine.

Special thanks to Iaspis.



