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## A Postcard from Tehran

[The Itinerant: When Exhibiting Turns Its Back Against Itself \(/online-residencies/doreen-mende\)](#)



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N.B. Read

the images of this blog-entry as another form of text.

In my introduction to the talk on the *Itinerant* at Sazmanab a bit more than a week ago,\* I elaborated on the conditions that are needed to bring forward the *itinerant* as a possibility to re-think the space of exhibiting through a geopolitical lens. If you look at the very first entry of my blog-project, *From the Desert*, then you will find a similar introduction that relates to an image practice departing from the GDR (East Germany) in support of the liberation movement of the Palestinians in the Middle East and North-Africa during the 1980s. The conditions of production and strategies of dissemination during the geopolitics of Cold War period amidst a socialist configuration of international relations, allow a beginning to re-think exhibiting processes through a geopolitical lens today.

\* (Sazmanab is currently one of the few independent and non-for-profit project spaces in Tehran founded by the artist Sohrab Kashani. Another important project space is Parkingallery founded by Amirali Ghasemi in 1998 already. Through the event, I also was introduced to Sohrab Mahdavi, founder of the magazine *TehranAvenue*, whose comments during the talk invited me profoundly to sharpen the following lines.)



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Along these

lines, rather as a note aside, I claimed that the practice of exhibiting is always also a practice of inhibiting. One participant from the audience requested a better elaboration on the concept of inhibition as an approach to exhibiting processes; and how all this relates to the *itinerant*. His insistency in the concept of inhibition re-activated some previous reflections that had been helpful in the configuration of ideas around the *itinerant*. Therefore, to some extent, the following lines are an extension of trains of thoughts (re-)emerging through the conversation during the talk about the *itinerant* last week. This-blog entry *A Postcard from Tehran*, perhaps, could also be read then as a kind of postcard from a journey's pause in a project space with an image projection, a talk, a conversation, and a group of people. I am borrowing the idea for the 'postcard' from Jacques Derrida who attached to the 'postcard' a textual process between addressee and sender: "but in the giving it holds back itself and withdraws, such a giving we call *sending*" (p.xi) This double gesture, or 'double bind' as Derrida calls it in his book *The Postcard*, will follow us throughout the further reflections on the *itinerant*, this time departing from an afternoon in Tehran few days ago.





Whenever a curator conceives an exhibition with artistic projects, he or she cannot do differently than to *inhibit* the conditions under which the work of art had been developed and produced. Furthermore, the space of exhibiting will also not show (inhibit to a certain extent) the endlessly many thoughts that a work on display might produce while the show is open to the public, and importantly, also beyond the actual end of an exhibition. This all might sound too banal to even write it down or speak about. However, exactly along such a double-gesture, which constitutes our practice of making something public, I wish to introduce the *itinerant* as a proposal to suspend the binary constellation of exhibition and inhibition. The *itinerant* shall introduce a correlation between a work of art and a work of thought; it shall undo a certain rivalry or competition between that which is exhibited and that which is not possible to exhibit. In other words, if exhibiting always comes with inhibiting, then such double-gesture takes us into geopolitical conflict. Because, in our times when artists, architects, lecturers, and curators fly around the globe for projects within a few weeks or even days, when the Federal Foreign Office in Germany celebrates the opening of the German Year in Brazil (2013/14) resulting in a series of public events here and elsewhere, when the Manifesta Foundation aims to extend the European Biennale to North-Africa (2010), when the German Federal Foundation initiated a Fund for artistic cooperation between Germany and African countries two years ago ... Finally, in our times when contemporary art of the present is deeply tangled up with globalizing forces, then it also is time to approach the space of exhibiting from such geopolitical conditions.





At some

point in my research, I did not follow further my interest in inhibition as a possibility to approach the exhibition, because it appeared to operate as a continuity of a binary constellation, almost as two competing forces. Rather, I wished to articulate the entangled relation between exhibition *and* inhibition. How could we unpack the 'and' within the ultimate double-gesture of making something public? How could we address the spatial as well as temporal displacement as a display practice, when the exhibition's presence *here* ultimately requests a certain absence *elsewhere*? (The juxtaposition of 'here' with 'elsewhere' resonates deliberately in the film *Ici et Ailleurs* by the Dziga Vertov Group.) How could we speak about such deep entangled relation, which appears in such a tiny, millions-time-a-day used word as the 'and'? However, at the same time, the 'and' speaks also of a disentangled relation between the two concepts. Because from a curatorial perspective, the practice of exhibiting just requests to put something on display. This is very simple. We might be not even aware of it, because it is such a trivial issue. However, if we want it or not, exhibiting inevitably includes the exclusion: Exhibiting relentlessly inhibits another work of art, it suppresses another artistic voice, it holds back a complex research, and finally, it conceals everything that is not placed on public display. How can we speak about this 'and' that separates and connects simultaneously the two poles of making something public? This is when the figure of the *itinerant* is at stake and in play: it creates a continuous movement between that which is explicitly made public – in words and also in images – and that which will remain unspoken but nevertheless, is present.





Another

voice from the audience at Sazmanab insisted in the mode of practice, when she asked about the realization of such a proposal as the *itinerant*. First of all, I should say that the *itinerant* is a helping figure in thinking, growing from a concern about geopolitics in exhibiting today. In other words, the movement within such double-gesture (ex-/in-hibition) that constitutes the act of making something public, will always fail to deliver a complete picture, as much as an image will always arrive absolutely delayed on public display. Any image, which is composed by means of tele-technologies (photo or film camera), will never be able to represent an event of the past, but if at all, it can only point towards (signifies) a delayed arrival of the moment when a way of seeing had been framed. Or putting it the other way around: an image always stretches itself into a certain future, which remains attached to a certain moment in the past (the moment when the picture was taken), but the knowledge about the image's public appearance always institutes a certain future that cannot be calculated to full extent. Such an image never will be the same: each arrival (making something public) comes with a loss, with inhibition and a set of contradictions. Therefore, any attempt to 'illustrate' or 'visualize' the appearance of the *itinerant*, for example as a curatorial theme, must fail. The only thing that remains to do is to show such loss, inhibition and contradictions without turning this kind of failure into a subject matter that is put on public display as another great achievement or curatorial discovery.





I'd like to end this entry, and thus, a sort of conclusion for the blog-project in a whole with a quote by Jean-Luc Nancy from the book *The Evidence of Film Abbas Kiarostami*. In the essay of the same title, Nancy unpacks impressively how the image in Kiarostami's films profoundly unsettles a power of representation; and how it evokes and displays the conditions for looking, as he calls it. (There is another discourse around the differences between 'to look' and 'to watch,' as for example, Ariella Azoulay prefers 'to watch' because it connects the gaze with the durational attention while watching a film). He refers to a conflicting polarity within the image itself, which oscillates – basically – between that which is seen and that which contests visibility – all which is given is withdrawn. He exemplifies such opacity when he writes: "(let us think again about the openings of these films: a door or a truck blocking the screen, a passage through a tunnel ...)" For Nancy, it is exactly such amount of opacity, and of withdrawal – without giving up its ultimate presence – that carry us away: "The gaze opens onto transports, carrying away – driving, lifting away: the world is in motion. Everything is situated but nothing is staying in its place. [...] But those places, "over there," remain out of reach, always beyond a new hill, a new bend in the road. we are carried in this transport, it is our existence [...] It is the condition of a permanent transformation or an indefinite and continual variation." (p. 50/52)





As I wrote in

the beginning, the talk at Sazmanab induced a few thoughts that touched upon 'inhibition' as a mode of exhibiting. The lines at hand appear as a diverted continuation, a textual process, or a *Postcard from Tehran*. Such speculation seduces me to write down another thought in proximity with the *itinerant*: a talk can be seen as making something public, i.e., a way of exhibiting in itself. Words and images appear in space, which brings together a particular public, even literally. But it does not stay in the mere exhibition of words and images, so to speak; not only did the images from my project-archive travel from here to elsewhere (Berlin to Tehran), rather, the actual situation – in situ – initiated a process of thinking, which can be seen as an *itinerant moment* within the actual event, the talk itself. What I want to say is, I guess, that the *itinerant* allows to articulate exactly an act of making something public that initiates a movement of thoughts, without quite knowing yet which exact destination such travelling mode might take. *It is the condition of a permanent transformation or an indefinite and continual variation*. Therefore, *itinerant* here should not be misunderstood as a 'real' itinerant activity, for example, when a theorist, the international curator or artist travels from one place to the other around the globe. Instead, it shall provide a platform that enables to speak about the geopolitical exigency within the space of exhibiting itself.







Thinking

exhibition practices through the double-forces of the *itinerant*, i.e., a mode of making public that insists in the co-existence of ex-/in-hibition, it addresses the exhibition as a travelling process between these two poles. It is a spatial constellation. In order to arrive from here to elsewhere, and vice versa, you will need to leave something behind. You always have to keep something at home, or at the place of departure whenever you begin to travel. You always carry an incomplete luggage to a point that it will not allow for any form of reflection on the textures of the present. You will miss knowledge while travelling to a place that is unfamiliar to you. You will misunderstand most likely, or even not understand at all, the language at a place that is foreign to you. It brings us back to Jean Genet's sentence that has been framing this blog-project here at hand: "Put all the images in language in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it's in the desert we must go and look form them."



After all, *The Itinerant. When Exhibiting Turns its Back Against Itself* proposes to turn the space of public presentation into a space of production. It produces a movement in thinking that travels between places, here and elsewhere, but won't stay at one particular location as an evidence of a truth. If there is any evidence and if there is any truth, then it is an evidence, which does not work without concealment and withdrawal that constitutes the present moment. Evidence is a result of what is seen from distance that "gives both the measure of its spatial removal and the measure of its power." Furthermore, it is a truth, which always subtracts itself from the context through which it emerges; it is a truth that "does not have to correspond to any given criteria." as Nancy suggests. And here, I would add, that the space of exhibiting exceeds its territorialized and territorializing measurement: it crosses borders, hence, it insists in its geopolitical exigency. Under such different conditions, the act of making something public goes beyond the direct action of exhibiting as a one-way movement. Each arrival will ultimately produce another arrival to come. In consequence, then, exhibiting will must need to turn its back against itself.

January 12, 2014 Doreen Mende

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