

REWRITING LIFE STORIES, BUILDING SOCIAL MEMORIES

In the first part of the essay *The Critic as Artist; with some remarks upon the Importance of doing nothing* (1891), Oscar Wilde¹ notes the importance of critical thinking in rewriting history. In fact, amongst the main characters' fervent dialogue the author puts in Gilbert's mouth the idea that "The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it. That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit"². Over a hundred years later, we can still affirm that rewriting, revising and re-visiting are the ways to critically access history. Then we can access either the already told history or the lost – and thus imagined or mythologized – one.

The act of creation emerges, for human beings, from the mythical Eden, from that lost original stage, from those non-recorded facts missing in written history or files. Within the relentless pursuit of history the narration can be updated with small fragments of tales, seen of course through the eyes of artists, creating a polyphony of stories that are the sum of thousands of both individual and collective stories. Indeed, Eden – a word evoking the genesis, the homeostasis and mythologies belaying every human being in this world – is the title chosen for this project by Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti.

This series of works (a large format video installation of three screens, a single channel video and ten large format photographs) has been made by the artists to reflect the need to rebuild origins, family stories, borders and people expelled from their territories for different reasons. Devoid of any need to show the wounds that the war may cause to a child, Anush Hamzehian delves into his own biography with the sole desire to know; to know more than what he has already learnt from family stories. He is the son of an Iranian father and an Italian mother and was conceived in Tabriz – a city located in north-western Iran – during the last trip the Hamzehian family was allowed to make to its native country in 1979, when the so-called Islamic revolution started. Having this background, Anush Hamzehian and Vittorio Mortarotti, together undertake a reverse journey towards that lost place of genesis. Returning is forbidden however, and they are forced to stop at the border between Armenia and Iran, two hours from Tabriz. They observe from that rocky desert edge an Iran they can only imagine now with a boundary guarded by Russian soldiers.

Sensations, feelings and thoughts of oppression and claustrophobia are awoken in them by this visual of an immobilized border where only trucks carrying oil and minerals used to manufacture weapons are free to pass.

Despite these feelings caused by the heavily defended border, Anush's memory is enriched by emerging stories of young people who still dream of leaving someday, prostitutes who work in the local cabarets or people who will remain on their land forever.

Within a canyon surrounded by mountains, the artistic duo tells stories of those who stay and those who leave, while Anush rewrites his own story. The violence – either explicit or implicit – of a border town like Agarak becomes artistic matter for their poetic narrative. The Aras River, in its course, bears silent witness to the inhabitants of this geopolitical edge that are determined by it and are confined to dream and to remember those who went away and who can now only look on from afar. This view defines them subjectively since, as the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes in his work *3*, both history and culture are involved – like polyphonic dialogues – in the constitution of subjectivities and in the construction of knowledge, because subjects are inhabited by the voices of their story, of their ancestors and their present, where the social function of memory is strongly felt.

As a kind of visual poetry (fixed and in motion) and with subtle reminiscences of refugees and displaced people around the world –and while questioning the viewer– Hamzehian and Mortarotti portray these inhabitants of the borders (and all their polysemic meanings) and in doing so place a current, sensitive and courageous topic in the horizons of contemporary art. It is a topic that neither the artists nor the art critics should omit, since our heavens are framed by ethics and poetics.