

Sareh Z Afshar

PhD Candidate, New York University

Postrevolutionary Retrojection for Posterity:  
“Seeing History Rather than Knowing It”

To imagine and practice another future, critical and historical resources are needed. For Iranians, one such resource was dramatized in conceptual artist Azadeh Akhlaghi’s spectacular 2013 series, *By an Eye-Witness*. A collection of 17 photographic reconstructions of historic 20th century deaths in Iran, the series offers up a set of visibilities previously inaccessible to Iranians by introducing microhistories of doubt into the foundational nation-building practice of public mourning.<sup>i</sup> Akhlaghi (b. 1978) flirts with the documented and undocumented to create pensive images around the intolerability of collective trauma; images that signal the ambivalent area between art and non-art, defined by Jacques Rancière as that “zone of indeterminacy” that inserts itself between two conceptions of an image: a duplication or an artistic operation.<sup>ii</sup>

Looking at this liminal space in which the series performs and the narrative doubt it illuminates in its wake, I elaborate how Akhlaghi inserts herself into a past she could not have personally witnessed—herself posing in the recreations, looking at the past—to ask the important question: Who gets to tell the story of a nation’s treasured dead? For her, this question eventually begged another: What would it mean to *see* history rather than *know* it?

In this paper I argue that by emphasizing “seeing history rather than knowing it,”<sup>iii</sup> Akhlaghi’s art collapses history’s binary opposition to memory, instead carving out a space for history in memory, approaching it as always a memory constructed as such. In this breakdown and in enacting the condition of her own subjectivation by willing herself a place within visibility, Akhlaghi shows us how to perform the possibility of a different, more open futurity. Change is the performance of possibility and, per Deleuze per Foucault, “the subject who sees is [herself] a place within visibility, a function derived from visibility”<sup>iv</sup>; Akhlaghi’s positioning of herself as an eyewitness solidifies both her sensate receptivity and her autonomy to act upon her desire for another future.

<sup>i</sup> By visibilities here I mean to evoke those Foucauldian “forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer” (Deleuze, *Foucault*, 52).

<sup>ii</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, (New York: Verso, 2009), 107. <sup>iii</sup> Rex Butler, “Azadeh Akhlaghi: An eye witness in Iran,” *Art Collector* 70, October–December (2014), <http://www.artcollector.net.au/AzadehAkhlaghiAnEyeWitnessInIran>.

<sup>iv</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1986]), 54.