# MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

**AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE**

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

# Re-Enactment as a Working Process

Azadeh Akhlaghi

Exactly eleven years ago, in June 2009, after the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran, a political movement started in Iran, which was later referred to as the Persian Awakening or Persian Green movement.

Many people regarded the election as fraudulent, and protested against it in the streets of Tehran.

The motto used during the first weeks of protests was "Where is my vote?" After a few weeks, it changed to "Death to the dictator".

During those days, a video of the death of a young, beautiful philosophy student, went viral. Neda Agah-Soltan, who was participating in the protests with her music teacher, was fatally shot in the chest while walking to her car. The video of the moment of her death was captured on a mobile phone camera by a bystander and was broadcast on the internet. *Time* magazine referred to Agah-Soltan's killing as "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history" at the time.[1]

During those days and months of unrest, I started to think about history: About all the political figures, freedom fighters, journalists, poets and writers, who died in a tragic way when there was no camera available to capture the moment of their deaths.

My idea for *By an Eye-Witness* came about during those days.

I did thorough research on the moment of death of Iranian freedom fighters, whose deaths took place between the Constitutional Revolution in 1908 and the Islamic Revolution in 1979. I looked at cases which are not visually documented, where our knowledge about the victims' deaths are based on confidential documents, official reports, eyewitnesses accounts, newspaper and radio reports. Unfortunately, we Middle-Easterners have no shortage of candidates for such a project, so I had to be selective.

I also tried to mark out the turning points of Iran's contemporary history. Most of the depicted killings are not only tragic but a crucial turning point in the particular kind of struggle they represent. In other words, if any of those people hadn't died at that particular moment, you could truly say our history would have been different.

My goal was to visually reconstruct the moment of a victim's death. The images that I created represent the most likely images of their deaths according to written sources, although no visual backup exists. The only element in the pictures that is apparently unrealistic is my presence in all of them. I am the eyewitness, an imaginary time traveller who has the ability to watch what was not visually recorded at the time of its happening. In all the images, I wear a red scarf, which represents the colour of martyrdom in Shia Islam.

I wanted to point out the repetitive tragedies that we Iranians have experienced during the past century. Most of the deaths depicted in my project are not the only examples of their kind, but instead they are part of this brutal circle that we have always had.

My research for this project took about three years. I went to libraries and archives and collected as much data as I could. I also interviewed many eyewitnesses who could give me an



1 – Azadeh Akhlaghi, *Mirzadeh Eshghi*, *3 July 1924*, 2012, digital print on photo paper, 110 × 209 cm. © Azadeh Akhlaghi

2 – Azadeh Akhlaghi, *Azar Shariat Razavi, Ahmad Ghandchi, Mostafa Bozorgnia,
7 December 1953,* 2012, digital print on photo paper, 110 × 267 cm. © Azadeh Akhlaghi

account of what happened before their eyes many years ago.

In 2012 I finally had the chance to shoot the images. I found a producer who gave me the opportunity to work with a professional group with a background in cinema.

Mirzadeh Eshghi was a young journalist and poet who was assassinated on an early morning in July 1924, inside his house in Tehran (fig. 1). His assassination was ordered by Reza Pahlavi, who became the next shah of Iran a few years later. To reconstruct Eshghi's death, I tried to be as accurate as possible. I found the location of his real house in the centre of Tehran, but what I discovered there was an ugly 4-storey residence instead of his old house. So I had to imagine his house, his flowers, his bicycle, his girlfriend, who had spent the night before there. I could not find any pictures of this woman. She is only a name that has come down in history: Catherine, the Armenian. I believe that history is made up of many unknown souls whose roles have never been mentioned in history books. But they were the people who suffered, and amongst them there are so many who struggled to create a better world for the people of the future.

On 7 December 1953, three students were murdered in the Faculty of Engineering at Tehran University. It happened a few months after the August 1953 coup d'etat, which overthrew Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq, a nationalist and democratically elected prime minister of Iran.

The coup was orchestrated by the CIA and MI6 and carried out by the Iranian military.

Two of my images are about this incident. In the student scene (fig. 2) I tried to reconstruct the moment of death of these young students who were shouting "Death to the dictator" and were fatally shot down by the shah's police. That was the first time that the armed police stormed inside a university, but it has happened again and again. Ironically, it was repeated exactly on 7 December (2009) inside the same faculty.

The next image shows the funeral of Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq (ill. 3). He was imprisoned for three years after the coup in 1953, then put under house arrest in his home in Ahmadabad a village some hundreds kilometres from Tehran in which he spent his days until his death in March 1967. Against the will of Dr Mosaddeq, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the shah, would not allow his body to be buried next to the martyrs of the movement in Tehran. So, instead Dr Mosaddeq was buried in one of the rooms of his own house in Ahmadabad.

All my images are meant to be viewed like the collective traumas of an Iranian guilty conscious. The show scenes where the people did not seize the chance to support and stand up for those who sacrificed their lives for them. In response, Iranian audiences reacted to my series very passionately. When I first showed my images in a galley in Tehran in 2012, three years after the launch of the Green movement, so many people burst into tears. Many of them, who were total strangers, came forward and hugged me. The show was full of passions and sorrows.



3 – Azadeh Akhlaghi, *Mohammad Mosaddeq, 5 March 1967,* 2012, digital print on photo paper, 110 × 171 cm. © Azadeh Akhlaghi

Many of the characters in my images have remained alive in Iranian collective memories but we hadn't had the chance to share those memories and to mourn for them as a people. So you could have likened the gallery to a sort of imaginary graveyard, in which each picture was a tombstone for a person whose death went unappreciated by all the regimes of Iran in the past century. It was prohibited to talk or to publish a book about many of these figures — so a kind of silence about their deaths has existed for many years.

1　Krista Mahr, "Neda Agha-Soltan", *Time*, 8 December 2009.