Nazgol Ansarinia: Between Critical Materialism and Critical Minimalism

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A fearless interdisciplinary artist (working across drawing, sculpture, installation, architecture, and video), Nazgol Ansarinia brings together a compelling set of practices converging toward a new stream of critical materialism (and minimalism) in contemporary art from the Global South. Her work opens new fields of investigation on the complexities of public infrastructure development. It also evokes the subjective memory—visual forms appealing to the viewer's touch or bodily presence—hidden behind different strategic raw materials. By proposing new dialectics of materialism (a backlash to the idea that we would live in a dematerialized world and economy) and minimalism (more political, intimate, and resilient than Western 1960–70s minimalism), her work reveals contested spaces and memories, bearing witness to the city and its evolution—mainly Tehran, in Iran.

Nazgol Ansarinia's project or psychovisual complex *Instruments of Viewing and Obscurity* begins with a meticulous inquiry into the mass housing brutalist architecture and buildings of Tehran[1] —with its extensive use of concrete and fossil fuels energy to toxic effect. She specifically looks at the subversive role of window structures and the issue of social control through official building codes and regulations. What are the tensions and relations between seeing and being seen in such a context, where the surrounding architecture feels almost anachronistic or outdated? How can we account for their formal manifestation in the built environment—namely the house as an extension of the body and the window as that of the eye?

American minimalist art historically provides numerous examples of this optical or political dialectics between seeing and being seen. For example, Robert Smithson's *Site* and *Nonsite* installations and their use of serial structures including mirrors (1960s), Dan Graham's glass pavilions (1980s), and Donald Judd's translucent sculptures (1960s). We could even consider Michelangelo Pistoletto's printed mirrors (1960s), to expand to the European context. They all have in common the practical and theoretical feature of placing the spectator in the ambivalent position of being the subject or object of vision and social control. This type of installation also references an industrial unconscious related to architectural experimentation and interactive dynamics, as a backlash to individualist mass housing architecture. At the same time, the cost or the traces of extractivist economies and raw material transformations is borne inside the installation itself—concrete, steel, glass, resin, used as rather transitory or shifting and non-standard materials.

In the case of Nazgol Ansarinia, her installation is organized almost as a human-scale city maquette or maze that is a mechanism of defense against being seen: A series of glass-like surfaces formed from the negative space of the extruded window frames and a multi-sited set of watchtowers paradoxically putting us under surveillance. Our visual and physical experience becomes both fragmented and synthesized through the presence of the large video projections on each side of the room, showing the building façade and windows

[1] By watching the videos as parts of the installation, the viewer can identify more specifically relatively low-rise buildings in central Tehran. These are usually built by individual investors or sometimes a family. The units are occupied by the middle class and their architecture varies from modernist 1960s style to the stone clad "Roman classical," which has been very popular in the last 15 years.

shifting from daylight to nighttime obscurity. The viewer can actively wander through these mysterious lines of utopian architecture in steel, stone, and glass in the exhibition space or the secret geometries activated by the windows' combinations on screens—like a chessboard blinking between abstract landscapes and musical notes. At one point when the camera zooms in on a particular window, bringing us to the edge of the private and intimate space, the architectural infrastructure and social control suddenly vanishes. A contact is established between the woman who stands up at her window looking—and us.

In this reversed gaze, challenging the boundary of public and intimate, Nazgol Ansarinia's installation feels like a ghostly construction site or a manufactured labor allegory provoking both instability and resilience. While her work expresses a kind of legacy or formal and optical genealogy with the aforementioned Western minimalist artists, Ansarinia seems to approach minimalism in a diagonal way, diverting its aesthetics from its standardized and liberal—or anti-socialist—roots, reframing it through the uncharted territories of post-Revolution Iranian urbanization bureaucracy and policies, and shifting the postmodern mindset of Western minimalist art to enhance a postcolonial and materialist critique of modernist architecture's (toxic) legacy in the Global South.

We can assess the consequences for the Iranian context using Nazgol Ansarinia's artist statement for this project:

> "Traditional Iranian architecture had solved the issue of visibility and observability through building predominantly courtyard houses, in which all the rooms were built around a central courtyard getting their light and fresh air from this private open space. When modernism reached Tehran in architectural form, the courtyard buildings with the windows looking into the courtyard and therefore into themselves were gradually replaced by apartment buildings with their outward-looking windows. In fact in the 1920s the newly established municipality of Tehran demanded that every new building should have windows facing the street; redefining the relationship between the private and the public architecturally, creating a field of tension between seeing and being seen (…) but has taken on a new turn after the revolution of 1979 (…) and the encouragement of each citizen to look for the misconduct in others, creating a hyper awareness of being constantly looked at."[2]

Instruments of Viewing and Obscurity manifests itself through dusted visions, sedimented forms, and ethereal apparitions—tracing invisible connections between brutalist architecture in Iran, post-minimal art, psychology of the masses, and Michel Foucault's panopticon surveillance model.[3] The installation questions the invisible disruptions of global infrastructures, shedding light on the interdependence of our resources, urbanization, and habitats. How do the invisible power structures and industrial transitions of our

[2] From Nazgol Ansarinia's artist statement for this project.

[3] In his seminal book *Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison* (*Discipline and Punish : The Birth of Prison*) from 1975, Michel Foucault used the panopticon, an architectural design by Jeremy Bentham (18th c.), as a model to explore systems of social control in disciplinary situations. Foucault argued that the panopticon, with its central tower allowing constant surveillance of prisoners, represents a mechanism for power and knowledge to reinforce each other.

hypermodern world become visible upon breakdown or collapse (be it economic, ecological, or symbolic)?

As a means of conclusion, we can link Nazgol Ansarinia's productive (in the industrial sense of this word) and post-socialist-inspired shapes and patterns to a different stream of historical minimalist art—that of German artist Charlotte Posenenske whose post-industrial and functionalist minimalism was summed up in a manifesto from 1968 that echoes Nazgol Ansarinia's *Instruments of Viewing and Obscurity* in interesting ways:

> "Often the elements of their combinations are very large in order to alter the spatial environment more thoroughly. They approximate architectural dimensions and for this reason also differ increasingly from the former gallery objects.
> They are decreasingly recognizable as "artworks."
> The objects should have the objective character of industrial products.
> The former categorization of the arts no longer exists. The artist of the future would have to work with a team of specialists in a development laboratory."[4]

[4] Charlotte Posenenske, "Statement" [Manifesto], *Art International* no. 5 (May 1968).