

Conversation with Pages

Babak Afrassiabi and Nasrin Tabatabai/ Pages in conversation with Casco's director Emily Pethick. To be featured in the upcoming issue of Untitled magazine (<http://www.untitledmag.co.uk/>)

Emily Pethick: You are now working on the sixth issue of Pages, perhaps you can tell me a bit about the magazine and how it started?

Pages: The very beginning of Pages was in 2003, a period of research, as well as friendships and acquaintances with various artists and cultural practitioners, as an attempt to understand the complexity of the conditions they work with in Iran, as far as it was possible. Later in 2004 we published the first issue of the magazine. However Pages was never only a magazine, it was and is a part of a larger project that seeks to create a flow of narratives and imaginations that are bound to specific conditions, both socio-political and cultural. We have to continuously revise and rethink our position and approach.

Every issue of the magazine, and the projects are another experiment in finding a conduit for that flow. One thing that we came to learn, is that there is no model or language for cultural practices that seek to address issues from a close range; especially for maintaining relevancy of time and place, both within the context that one works in and addresses, and outside of that.

EP: Your activities often transcend the pages of the magazine, and have moved into other formats, such as installations, video essays, radio programmes and workshops. Your recent project 'Sunset Cinema' at Display in Prague marked the beginning of a series of projects that have looked at the geopolitical conditions that define a place, this specific place being the Iranian island of Kish, somewhere that you will continue to refer to in your upcoming project at Casco. Can you say something about the particular history of this island, and what drew you to it as a site?

P: The initial realisation of 'Sunset Cinema' took place a year before its revised version in Display, which adopted a different approach, and the work for Casco again has a different focus point when it comes to Kish. Kish is a small island in the Persian Gulf and has

been functioning since before the 1979 Iranian revolution as a place for economic, architectural and touristic experiments by the state and private entrepreneurs. Politics of course played a role throughout this recent – and ongoing – history. In fact Kish could be seen as a back-lot for experiments with modes of modernity and national and international identity. Often, to be able to address the subconscious of a centre, one has to search its peripheries. Kish offers us the possibility of a metonymical approach towards the mainland. Before the revolution – in 1978 to be exact – the island was partially developed into a private resort for the royal family and their international guests of honour. It was supposed to reflect the ‘success’ of the 10-year plan of modernisation reforms to the outside world. A year later of course the Islamic revolution confirmed its victory. Soon afterwards Kish was declared a free trade zone. This was a step towards opening up a far off island to foreign investors and tourists, mainly for economic reasons as a kind of a response to foreign embargos. Many hotels and shopping malls were built with a lot of imports from neighbouring Emirates. In the end, that little tolerated life style – with a leaning towards its western opposite – which was initially pursued to attract foreign tourists, became an attractive getaway for Iranians from the mainland. Kish in many ways has been an undecided piece of land, mirroring the (un-) desired changes on the mainland – either economic, cultural and political – in most peculiar ways.

EP: While you focuss on the specific geo-political conditions of a place, simultaneously your title for the project at Casco – ‘Undecided Utopias’ – suggests a more abstract relation to the notion of ‘place’. Can you talk a bit about your own approach to this site, and the particular focus of this part of the project?

P: The almost schizoid nature of the island as mentioned briefly, is manifested through its design and displays. In fact the particular designs, whether developed before or after the revolution, are symptoms of the island’s historical ambivalence as an – economically, politically or culturally articulated – place. Ambivalence on the one hand offers space for multiple fantasies, but also, when it is historically prolonged, when it becomes chronic that is, fantasies may be built on traumas of the past. And this is certainly the case with Kish. The architectural developments that were made by the previous regime of Iran were on the spot where local villagers had lived for centuries. To their dislike they got

displaced and their village demolished to make way for these developments. After the revolution all the villas, palaces, casinos and clubs were confiscated – and said to have been partially looted by the villagers. The buildings were reformed to offer other – more acceptable – services. And soon, after the island’s declaration as a free trade zone, rapid developments and a variety of architectural exercises came to accompany what was left from the past.

Recently, a privately initiated project has involved up to twelve German architecture firms in a competition to design a huge international tourist and business resort. Whether it will ever be built is another issue completely. But the resulting designs are a mixture of 19th century European architecture – like the Cote d’Azur – and hyper postmodern buildings with orientalist detailing. Our approach to Kish in ‘Undecided Utopias’ is initially within the realm of design and display. The project tries to address design in its exploitation or misrecognition of localities. It is at this level that a place, when subjected to such design, is brought to a certain extra-territorial, or extra-geographic mode. But on the other hand, such excess provides the best ground for the coming together of various geographic and cultural points of views, enacted in design. In fact it is within this perversity of design that what are thought to be discords, come to outdo one another’s fantasies. In the end you cannot tell what is whose fantasy.

EP: These various contradictory elements are very apparent in your video, in which you interview some of the architects from the German firms that are planning the resort. In the piece one of them describes Kish as a place with no regulations, an open place for experiments. Another goes on to explain that this kind of openness would not be possible without a border or gate, thus it becomes apparent that this so-called freedom is highly regulated and controlled. In fact, their creation of a kind of international free zone creates a place that could be just about anywhere. Within cultural production there is a similar question about context as something that one either relates to or negates – i.e. notions of site-specificity or autonomy. How do you think about the question of context in this project in relation to the art context that you will present it in?

P: The Pages projects that we have initiated since 2004 have all been focusing on circumstances specific to certain contexts, and moments in history. Notions of site specificity and autonomy do not

really have the same oppositional relationship as in the past. Negation of a context can be a way of relating to it. In other words all artistic positions are context related one way or another, and it's not about the degree of this relationship but the way and the form in which this relation is set about. Globalization has also brought with itself an awareness of contextual difference, which is read into objects and images presented to us, despite their initial intentions. The notion of a 'free zone' or 'free trade zone' is described in a specific way internationally; but in the case of Kish island, there are various, often contradictory, readings of it, depending on who and when. The word 'free' in the phrase sometimes suggests a kind of difference in what Kish has to offer in comparison to the mainland. This ambiguity is kept in the air for reasons of tourism and trade. There is an un-official tendency in Kish to set itself apart from the mainland, yet only on the surface.

In the case of our practice, the specificity of a situation that is addressed functions both as a referent, a device, or dispositif to tackle more general concerns. Exploring concepts and notions through the traits of a particular situation opens up possibilities for their displacement and re-articulation, and other connections and participations. It is basically about offering a re-reading of concepts through real events and other histories. It is hard to say how exactly this relates to art. But we suppose what defines its relation to the art context is the spectators' and the art institutions' cultural, ideological and historical positioning towards what is at issue in a work.