

## INTERVIEWS

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### On Documentation

Parastou Forouhar in conversation with David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi



Parastou Forouhar, *Documentation*, 1998, installation view, Hamburger Bahnhof, 2003.  
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You walk into a room. Documents are stuck across its interior walls, and boxes containing further sheets of information are sat below them on shelves. In the middle of the space is a photocopier on a plinth. You are free to move around as

you please, picking up and reading documents. You immediately sense that there is a lot of information to process here. You won't be able to read everything. The first thing that you happen to pick up is a letter from a German politician called Helmut Lippert to the artist, Parastou Forouhar, dated 30 August 2000. He thanks Forouhar for her open letter to the German president, and writes of his doubts about whether a suitable path has been found in terms of Germany's relationship with Iran. At present, he says, they are not managing to balance support for the reformist president, with a 'firmer clarification of what the western democracies expect of him.' This letter is very partial and clearly refers to other conversations – you're not entirely sure what the discussion is about.

The next document you find is a letter from Forouhar herself, to a Professor Jochen Frowein, who is a member of the International Commission of Jurists. Forouhar writes about her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, who were both prominent members of the political opposition in Iran. She says that they and other opponents of the government were murdered in autumn 1998. She writes about efforts to progress the legal investigation of these crimes, and her regret that the Iranian judiciary seems to offer her no hope. She urges Frowein to help her in putting the case before an international court. Next you look at an article from a Frankfurt newspaper, which commemorates the 10th anniversary of the chain murders in Iran, and talks about Forouhar's efforts to raise awareness. The author recounts details of the legal processes which have followed the murders, but also talks about the daily life of Forouhar, whose phone is ringing incessantly as the media search for interviews and statements. The article makes it clear that Forouhar has become a public figure, and that the process of fact-finding continues.

The most obvious way to begin talking about Parastou Forouhar's 1998 work *Documentation* is simply to tell the story behind it – the relationship that it has with a set of political murders that took place in Iran in the late 90s. Instead of that, we have started with this intentionally sketchy account of encountering the installation because what it offers the viewer is not simply a narrative which can be recounted, but an experience of being confronted with a wealth of information, and having to piece things together to find out what is going on. What follows is a conversation about how the artist came to create this experience, and what its significance might be.

**DH/HY:** The story behind *Documentation* is deeply personal. The documents in it are all related to your parents' cold blooded assassination by Iranian secret service agents in the late 1990s, and the work is also linked with the fact that you were deeply involved in a public campaign to bring the perpetrators to justice at this time, through the media and official channels in different countries. Despite these personal connections, the shape that it takes – the form of a cold, organised archive, gives us a feeling of the abstract authority of modern institutions, rather than the plight of an individual. How did you decide to produce *Documentation* in this way?

**Parastou Forouhar:** In 1999, almost a year after my parents were murdered, the case was still ongoing in the Iranian judiciary and I had to frequently travel between Iran and Germany. At the same time, as an artist I was supposed to be working on a show in Frankfurt. Before that, I had participated in a group show in Austria but the Frankfurt show in autumn 1999 was the first solo show after the death of my parents. The works which were shown in Austria were from before

the events in Iran, but the exhibition opened afterward. When I saw the show, I felt almost alienated from my own works. On the one hand, there were these typographic works and also some digital works based on ornamental patterns (a type of work I am still making today). On the other hand, there were these events that were occupying my mind and my whole life, and I was trying very hard to find a human way to confront and deal with this extremely abhorrent situation. I couldn't find any trace of my personal struggle in that exhibition, and it made me question my own relationship with my work. I should also say that during my frequent trips to Iran, my parents' death had made me into a public figure, which I never was before – this is just something that happened to me, I did not seek it out.

The case of this murder was of high importance to the Iranian public and I was asked to speak up, telling what I knew about the legal processes and the event itself. I was happy to do this because I felt it was my duty. As the daughter of two of the victims of a series of chain murders of political dissidents, I had access to some information which I had to share with society. Anyway, for the Frankfurt show I wanted to find a way to connect my art to this existential preoccupation of my mind. I had some conversations with art theorists and artist colleagues around me and I decided that I should break the boundary between my life, my mental and emotional processes, and my artistic practice. I wanted to create a work based on the ongoing investigations into my parents' murder by the agents of the Iranian government's secret service. What materials did I have, and what potential forms were there for turning them into an artwork? I decided that a direct documentation of the ongoing case itself was what I had to deal with here. The work is also called *Documentation*.

After my first visit to Iran which took over 40 days, I wrote a text for a press conference in Germany which was like a chronicle of the events – a detailed report of what happened in Iran and what I saw and got to know. A document using an objective language, as opposed to something that would take a political stance, was in my opinion the best way for me to communicate this. I wasn't a politician and I didn't want to choose the language of politicians. That press conference was the beginning of a process which is still going on. Since then I have produced and also collected a lot of texts and documents. I have also written many letters to international organizations, human rights groups, and authorities. There have been other press materials and writings as well. I have collected every text which documents the process of following this case in Germany. These things, which were actually produced during this process, turned into the material for this work.

These documents gradually made the limitations of following this case clear to me. What is the language used by different organizations and individuals? How is a single fact or piece of information treated differently in terms of its language when it is reported by a journalist and by a politician? I put together all these documents that I had gathered during a year, including my own letters, the replies I had received, texts I had produced to report events and inform the public, and also some of the publications printed by the press. That turned into the basis of my work for the Frankfurt show. What was really important to me was that I didn't want to emotionally stimulate the viewer. I just wanted to lay bare some political processes. That is why the language of the texts became really important to me. Except some extracts from the press, there is nothing

emotional in the language of any of the texts. Even in those cases, the emotional tone of the texts has more to do with the approach of newspapers than it does with the events themselves, especially if we think about how 'Iran' is exoticized in the German media.



Parastou Forouhar, *Documentation*, 1998, installation view, Hamburger Bahnhof, 2003.  
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I wanted to make all these documents available to the public. At the same time, I quite liked the aesthetic of the archive, because it avoided emotionalizing the situation, and I wanted to incorporate this; boxes which are normally used to keep paper documents, simple wooden shelves, regular announcement boards, etc. Nothing forces the viewer, and the documents are very easily accessible. I also wanted to create a kind of archive in which all of the information would be made public at the same time, rather than things being edited, selected or put out piece by piece as they are by governments and institutions. *Documentation* shows what I think a normal public space designed for sharing information would look like. I wanted to put the viewer in such a space. Also, I used to reproduce my own texts and send them over to different people, press, and organizations. I wanted to ask the viewer to do the same and copy these documents and take the information with them. I wanted them to take part in the circulation of information and to raise awareness. That is why I decided to put a photocopier in the middle of the space. The installation looks like a room with one side open. When the viewer enters, there will be a one-on-one relationship between the individual and the documents as people will either lean over the shelves or will look up at the boards, only being able to read one piece at a time, and not looking at anybody else when they do so. If someone decides to copy a piece, the isolation will break up and people will face each other around the photocopier.

It is a work in progress by nature. The process of following the murder of my parents is not yet finished – I am still writing new letters for example – so the work still continues and in each exhibition there is some new material.

**DH/HY:** When you face the boxes of paper and the boards on the walls, the sheer volume of the material feels like a challenge, and it is an effort to piece the parts together and work out what is going on. This is emphasised by their content, which is often written in a dry, institutional language. It is not an entertaining experience. In a way the work reproduces the loneliness that individuals feel when they are confronting institutions.

**PF:** That's a very interesting point. I wanted to take the viewer to my own situation and have them experience what I experienced. I didn't want to tell anybody how to think or what to think. I just wanted to share an experience with them – the experience of confronting the Iranian judiciary on the one hand, and international organizations on the other. These have their own differences though. The Iranian judiciary sends you around the houses, covers up, contradicts itself, even lies to you. In my letters I have documented these things very objectively with a clear attempt not to play on viewers' emotions. However, the so-called international community, for example human rights organizations, have an altogether different language. In particular, legal bodies employ a peculiar language. For example I have corresponded with some international lawyers to find out how to make an international case to investigate this murder. The replies are very interesting because they also show how individuals are limited in their relationships with these systems, although the international systems are in many ways substantially different from their Iranian counterparts. A German politician would sympathize with you in the beginning of their letter, then they would add that they cannot do anything more than criticizing Iranian government's human rights record. The UN human rights commission wrote to me in a letter that they would have to send these documents, including official confessions from some agents of Iran's secret service, to the Iranian government and then wait for a response. You can see that it is a catch-22 bureaucracy. These letters are now part of the work.

**DH/HY:** Do you also see the work as straightforward political activism? For example, that it gives you an excuse and an opportunity to make a range of different documents about these events available to the public?

**PF:** Yes, that's a central challenge of the work for me. I wanted to break the boundary between what I was doing as a political activist, if you may, or to say it with a different wording, as an individual who was following a case of political murder, and what I was doing as an artist. I wanted to break this boundary both in my mind and in practice, then the energy which I had in each of these two spaces joined up together. I also think that I didn't have any other choice if I wanted to keep my artistic practice still existentially valid to myself.

**DH/HY:** The questions of truth and justice are central to *Documentation*. Independent of the work, you are looking for truth and justice, and that is reflected in the work as well. In the art world it is not fashionable to treat truth as something that can be confirmed or definitely decided on. Nowadays we prefer to talk about the complications of truth and its multiplicity. How do you see the work with regards to your own search for truth?

**PF:** *Documentation* definitely shows complications in the nature of truth. It shows how truth is actually produced by bureaucracy, by language, and by institutions. It doesn't reveal the truth. Nowhere in the work do we find out what the truth was. Finding the truth here is more like a wild goose chase. You may have some facts, but you can never get to the big picture. In complex situations like this, many documents are produced and this confuses the truth, rather than revealing it. However, I think that admitting that the truth is complicated and very multilateral is not just something that is used to create mystery in the artworld. Art complicates the truth because things are actually complicated out there in the world. This complication is not an intellectual hobby of some artists. I think simplifying a situation which is complicated in reality can be dangerous. That is how so many stereotypes have been created by the media and politics, whereas the reality is more difficult to understand.



Parastou Forouhar, *Documentation*, 1998, installation view, Hamburger Bahnhof, 2003.  
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**DH/HY:** Given that you mention stereotypes, it would be interesting to hear who the work is intended for – whether you think of it as being mostly for German (or now non-Iranian viewers) and if so, how that effects the way that you present it. Do you think that an Iranian viewer will experience it differently, and do you consider that when installing it?

**PF:** From the beginning, this was a work for a German audience, because wrote most of the letters and statements were written in that language. Apart from a couple of interviews and some exchanges with the UN, most of the documents are originally in German. For the translation of the work into English, I thought we should have enough documents translated so that the repetitive nature of the process is communicated. A good part of my letters simply repeat the information which is already included in previous exchanges, but the process requires you to repeat what you had said before each time you want to add a new piece of information. The issue of 'repetition' is important for me here.



Moreover, German is very dry and jaded in its bureaucratic usage. For example, there is a letter that I wrote to Ayatollah Shahroudi, then head of Iran's judiciary. In this letter, I simply tell how I have been sent around the houses just to get a very simple piece of information. It was a bitter process, but actually the original Persian letter that I wrote was not as bitter as the German translation of it. German re-emphasizes the bureaucratic aspect of this process.

Exactly because of the language of the work, it primarily addresses a non-Iranian audience. Only people who have access to the language of the work can communicate with it – whether Iranian or non-Iranian. Here, once again, the work follows the logic of the archive. Archives are bound to languages, and only people who understand the language of an archive can make sense of it. In that sense, it was quite natural within the nature of the work that it should address a Western audience. How does this audience understand Iran? How does it read about or understand political disasters in Iran? One important thing for me here was to get rid of the sense of victimization. I wanted to stop viewers from seeing the situation in terms of victims. That is probably why the work is, as you said, imposing, or if you like, demanding. You have to read quite a lot of things to understand what the work is about. You need to spend some time to understand the context. I didn't want the viewer to be able to separate their own context from the context of the events in the work. Here, the Iranian context is intertwined with the Western context and with the context of international institutions.

**DH/HY:** In discussing the origins of *Documentation*, you mentioned that it rose out of a tension that you felt between the art that you were then making, and the personal and political situation that had so effected your life. In other interviews and texts, you have also talked about the way that some artists of your generation retreated from the situation of Iran in the 1980s into the world of art, and you have been a bit critical about that, at least implicitly. Clearly you are still making artworks, some of which are comparable in style to the things that you were making prior to the archive's original formation. Could you say more about this contradiction between art and politics – how it has been significant in your career, and how you feel about it now?

**PF:** I think there are two issues at stake here. As far as that so-called 'tension between me and my art' after the assassination of my parents is concerned, I'd like to retreat to Adorno's famous dictum that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. The way I understand this is not that poetry has become impossible, but I think what Adorno means here is that after Auschwitz everything has to be re-thought. You need to re-think poetry altogether. Auschwitz marks such a shift in the world that ignoring it is barbaric. It was the same in my experience as well. Everything had to go through a process of rethinking mediated by that event. When you accept that looking via such a prism is not part of your intellectual system, then your art is also re-defined in terms of that. After I did *Documentation*, even the works which I had done before would be different when I began to look back at them from this new standpoint. *Documentation* took a very non-metaphoric approach to the event of my parents assassination. It had a very one-on-one approach. That, in itself, reshaped and redefined the rest of my artistic practice as well. It transformed my other works. In that sense, it actually helped me to 're-claim' my art and make it my own once again. It was no-longer alienated – or at least it was less alienated. *Documentation* helped to bridge a conceptual gap which was about to happen between me and my work. What I

mean is that after *Documentation* my previous works were no longer what they used to be. They transformed in retrospect. I think what Adorno means is also very similar. You have to confront, to get engaged, with Auschwitz. You cannot ignore it in your work. Then it will transform your future and past practices.

On the other hand, when you are in a situation which blocks your freedom of thought and your freedom of practice, a freedom which for me personally is the entry point to artistic practice, you have to find ways around it. However, you shouldn't forget that although you have found a way around the situation, you haven't changed the situation. That reality is still the reality of the outside world. It hasn't changed. For me, *Documentation*, with its ongoing nature, is also a reminder about that reality which continues to exist outside of my art. This work has helped me to stay in contact with that reality, without ignoring it, while I still produce 'works of art'. That is how I also define the relationship between art and politics. This relationship is very important to me. In my mind, these are substantially different realms. Politics always feels obliged to give answers. It always simplifies the situation so that it can provide answers. Whereas, in art, I look for questions, uncertainties, doubts. It opens up the space for multilateral thinking, where no simple answer can be given. It unsettles answers which are given by politics. It is the opposite of it.

**DH/HY:** Based on what you have said so far, it seems like you have an interestingly contradictory idea of what *Documentation* involves – that it is both a utopian form of the archive, which can help to raise awareness of issues in a non-imposing way, but also that it somehow expresses the situation of a modern subject trying to deal with the great weight of bureaucracies, judiciary systems, etc. How do you feel about this apparent contradiction?

**PF:** That contradiction is definitely in the work, but it is not something that I intended. My aim was always for *Documentation* to go against the logic of bureaucracies – to make everything open. When you confront institutions like these you always have the feeling that they are keeping secrets, that something is always being held back. What I wanted to do was to give everything to people, and to let them have freedom over how they would engage with it. However, the strategy of archiving which is used here does also lay bare contradictions which exist in reality. When you see all of this information together, you experience it very differently. Rather than being fed information step by step as happens in a bureaucracy, you experience the scale of it all in one place. You feel a conflict between utopian values of freedom, and the way that these processes are actually organised. This does not come from my own intentions for the work, but from the material that it is made of, and from contradictions which exist in reality. In making everything public – not only details of political murders, but also the realities of institutional processes – I am trying to go against the logic of governments that would cover things up.

**DH/HY:** We have talked quite a bit about the way that you would like viewers to experience the archive, but it would be good to hear what kind of feedback you have had about the way that people have actually experienced it, and what they have thought of it. Do you think it has been successful in conveying the atmosphere that you wanted from it? Have there been any barriers to people experiencing it this way?



**PF:** After so many years of exhibiting this work, I think one main thing is that the work is relatively demanding. Many people refrain from this. The work expects the viewer to do a lot of reading, to gather pieces of this puzzle, to interact with the space of the work. I gave it a lot of thought, and I decided that it is not right to simplify the work and its process. I didn't want it to become something like a 'beginners' guide' to these political murders in Iran. If someone wants to understand this context, they should do a bit of work. There is no short cut. There are no instructions to take you step by step. I think most stereotypes are actually produced as a result of simplified consciousness. Stereotypes simplify the complicated nature of reality and give back something which is easy to digest. For me, archiving in general and this work in particular is the reverse movement of the production of stereotypes. I wanted to interconnect various contexts in Iran and the West, and I wanted the viewer to feel the burden of this uneasiness. That's why I think the demanding nature of the work is a result of the complicated nature of the situation that it deals with. How far the viewer is ready to go is a different question. It is like a puzzle and someone might decide to take only one piece of it. Nonetheless, they will know that they have only taken a part of it, and that their consciousness is partial. This has been very important to me too – not to give the impression that understanding the full picture is easy or even possible.



Parastou Forouhar, *Documentation*, 1998, installation view, Volkskundemuseum des Steiermärkischen Landesmuseums Joanneum, 2002.  
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**Parastou Forouhar** is an Iranian female artist that lives and works in Germany. Her work has been exhibited around the world including Iran, Germany, Russia, Turkey, England, United States and more. Forouhar's art reflects her criticism of the Iranian government and often plays with the ideas of identity. She was exiled from her home country after her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, were

murdered. This loss of fuels Forouhar's work and challenges viewers to take a stand on war crimes against innocent citizens.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi

**Hamed Yousefi and David Hodge** are co-curators of *Recalling The Future: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Art*, which opened at Brunei Gallery, SOAS in London in January 2014.

**Hamed Yousefi** is an Iranian filmmaker, critic and cultural commentator based in London. He received an MA in Cultural Studies from Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran (2007). He has worked on different aspects of a developing political culture in Iran. With a background in journalism as an editor at Shargh Newspaper, which was banned in 2006. More recently, he is working on a genealogy of the political culture of Islamic Republic. He has several publications, most of them in Farsi.

**David Hodge** is in the final year of a PhD at the University of Essex researching the 1960s work of Robert Morris. Since 2011, Hodge has also worked as documentary producer, writer and director for the BBC World Service, making short films about international modern and contemporary art. He is also the co-author of *The Contemporary Art Book*, published by Carlton Books in 2009.