

# OBLIVION, BLINDNESS AND BOOK-BURNING

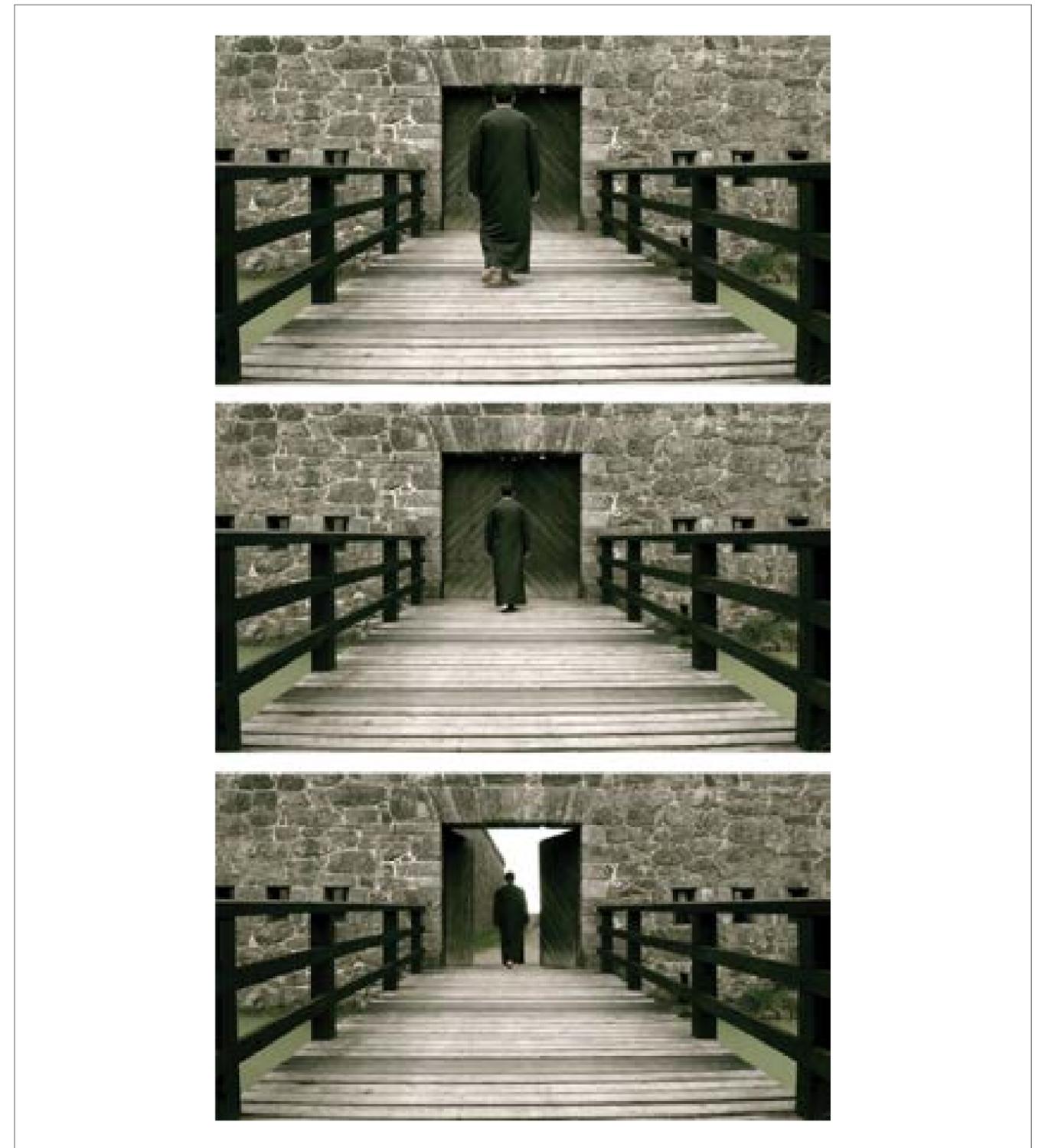
By: Ali Eftehad

*"A requiem for libricide is a multimedia event held last year in Niavaran cultural center in Iran. This event benefits from different mediums like theatre, performance art, video installation, live music and audio installation. As it is obvious by the name it is a piece about lost knowledge. The knowledge that mankind lost during history due to so many arsons in the libraries. The books -our knowledge, our history- have been burned and so many names and many things have been erased like they have never existed. The language and words play a certain role in this piece. The language used in a requiem for libricide does not belong to a certain period of time, it changes and evolves. At the first part of the event a man in a black robe meets the audience: he is quite as if he is performing a ritual: sometimes he whispers in the ears of some audience: as if he reveals a secret: you will be burned: you will be vanished from the face of the earth with a blink of an eye..*

*Then he leads audience to another floor. Everything is dark and the only light we see is coming from candles. In the first floor which is actually beneath the entrance room: the video-installation is being played. A man and a woman are narrating a story of a library in an archaic language. The man is standing in a TV set at the left and the woman at the right while a third video is being played at the center representing some images of a vast sea and different cities and a man -a walker- in black who passes all those castles and realms and seas and even times. When the video stops the first performer in the black robe appears again: this time he speaks loudly. He quotes some parts of the video as if he is a fortune teller and telling the audience their inevitable destiny. Then he leads them to another floor: where the live part begins. This floor is above the entrance hall. Here the first performer (named as no.0) disappears for a minute and then comes back in a different role. He plays a spring drum and sings some parts of Gatha (which is the holy poems of avesta, in zoroastrian language). There is a table at the center of the room and there are four performers wearing black outfits that belong to no specific period of time but remind of customs of circles of brotherhood: sitting at the tables, heads down, eyes closed and not moving until no.0 finishes singing. After no.0 left they start to move and search in the heels of papers on the table. With a sound of the strike of a singing bow by one of the performers: they all bring out their matches and light the candles in front of them. Every time the performer no.4 makes a sound out of the singing bow the performers light up or put out the candle's fire periodically. And each time the darkness realms before their next act. Their movements and language evolves slowly. There are two women (no.1 and no.2) and two men (no.3 and no.4) at the table. It seems as though the women and the men can not see each other. The women are only capable of sensing each other and so are the men. Like they are present at a same place in different diversions of time. Some times they can sense the presence of each other like an echo of a distant time but can not completely comprehend what is going on. The two women are like one soul divided in two corpses and they are not earthly. They are like sisters of the fate: they write and read and then burn what they wrote. Sometimes they do believe in themselves and sometimes they doubt: their characters changes little by little: like they are fallen angles who can slowly feel what it is like to be human. The men but are like lost souls. They only read the papers and each time they turn into what they read. They become blind, become lovers, become light and become darkness, they speak in different languages, some that do not even exist: they are like mankind during history: but slowly they take control of the fate: they gain the quality to rule the fate: they anonymously control the women characters. And the third part of the event is live music: as if music is the only form of art that could survive that dark realm of oblivion."*

ON A REQUIEM FOR LIBRICIDE, EPISODE 23, FROM RAZVARZI SERIES

(Artist commentary)



A Requiem For Libricide, still frames from video-installation, Performed by Ali Eftehad, Location: Carlstens Fästning, Sweden, videography by Nikoo Tarkhani

# ALI ETTEHAD

*"The temple of vegetal memory on A Requiem For Libricide"*

By: Masood Shahrari

## PART I

The dragon is grounded. That night "A Requiem For Libricide" had its last performance when the dragon landed on. Its tail at western gate, and its head on the eastern. Without a doubt the news on the first page of all news agencies shocked no one more than Ali Ettehad: "Daesh set fire on a library with three thousand year old books and scripts in Mosul. According to news nearly 112,709 books was burned in this arson." It reminds the myth of a Chinese emperor who adored dragon so much that had his castle painted with dragon images; but when the real dragon found out about this love and came to him; he had to leave his castle.

Apart from Jungian coincidence with the closing night of "A Requiem For Libricide", the fire that burned Mosul library reminds of other hard winters from the book of history. As if winter is a proper season for burning books that for some people have no use but to warm their nipped hands. A little bit farther than Mosul, in this very season, more than thousand years ago during the realm of Abbasid caliphate in Bagdad; thousand sacks of Manichaeist books were burned to dust. The silver and golden river of fluid silver and oil color running from paintings in the books astonished people. In this very Bagdad Hulaqu Khan ordered to throw all the books in Bagdad library in Tigris river or get smashed beneath horses shoes. And all this may be added to plunder of five major libraries in Bagdad in 2003. It was probably winter when Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni burned the library of Ray or Mahmoud Afghan Isfahan's library or Amr ibn al-As Alexandria's or Egyptian military Cairo's or Taliban 5500 manuscripts in Baghlan or Mongols the main library of Bukhara and so on and so on... There is no end for this list.

"A Requiem For Libricide" is an ongoing requiem for the history of book burning from the beginning to this day and even future. Ali Ettehad's requiem is a sad reaction to the archetype of libricide as a phenomena that goes far beyond 451 Fahrenheit in which paper gets burned. "A Requiem For Libricide" reminds us of an obscured tendency toward destruction in human nature.

## PART II

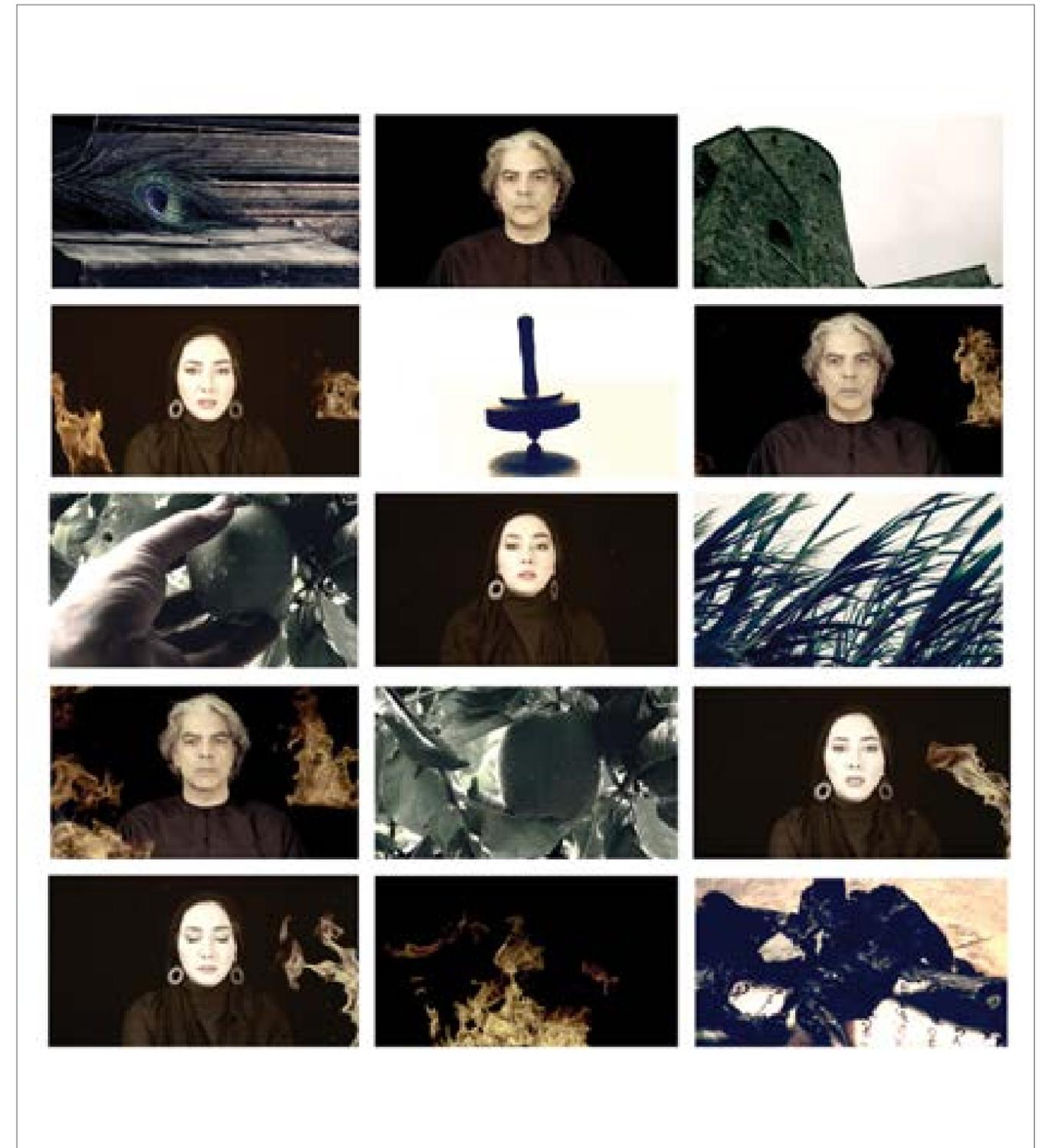
Scribe is a person who writes scripts; and also keep track of them. In the old days, many Iranian authors, poets and writers were scribes as well. Scribes were the real confidants and broadcasters;

the protectors of the culture. Even after book burnings they used to write what was lost by hand. Writing by hand was an important way of propagating ancient scripts even after the invention of printing machine. Scribe was a respected career in pre-Islamic and even post-Islamic period. Manichaeists were one of the pioneers in spreading their secrecy through scribing. According to some evidence there was a tradition by which scribes let those eager to read and learn into their little workshops and libraries so that they may read scripts by the candle light and received a little sum in return. "A Requiem For Libricide" take place in one of those unbeknown cryptic workshops. In a spiral place, not unlike the author's Borgesian mental mazes, in which walking is equal to going back in time, the show happens in a three floor stage.

After watching a video-installation audience get guided to another floor and they witness a strange scene in which four scribes dialogue and write and slowly forget everything. The interesting point is that Ettehad uses video-installation which is a modern medium for an event that seems to be pretty old. This medium symbolically shows its contrast with paper books. And the actors (scribes) are singing a requiem for centuries of forgetfulness and the audience with all their interactions can not escape their historic fate even if they tried. By such a show, Ali Ettehad is trying to compare the situation of his hysteric and desperate scribes to the situation of Iranian intellectuals today. He points out to those intellectuals like Borges (who was a full-scale scribe) whose sight has been lost, wandering around in a desert trying to protect something that is long gone.

## PART III

Ali Ettehad is a Middle-Eastern artist and it seems obvious that the context in which his works take place, more than referring to global issues, refers to the situation of Middle East. The history of libricide (book burning) is very strange and notable in this region. This history is verbal; based on sources that are lost. Something weird and complicated like the strange medieval machine that one of Characters in "the theatre of memory" by Fuentes that aimed to recreate events as they might happen. They say that the first book was created by Mani (the prophet of light) and they also say that this very first book was burned to dust during the first libricide in history. The first book burning for the first book; not so unlikely! As Mani



A Requiem For Libricide. Still frames from video-installation. Performed by Hanieh Tavassoli and Mehdi Ahmadi. videography by Ali Ettehad and Mousa Hashemzadeh

claimed his inspirations were graphic and he was the first prophet who started to spread his legacy through books. According to this story Mani is definitely an exception between ancient prophets. It seems that The destiny of Mani and his prophecy is intertwined with decoy and forgetfulness. Even when in 1930 they found his letters and scripts in a region in China, it takes only ten years till a bombing in Berlin during the 2nd world war destroys the library in which those letters and books were kept; and so those books reach their fatalistic destination which is extinction. this destiny is what brings tears to the eyes of audience in "A Requiem For Libricide". This destiny is that total forgetfulness that we all have to face. Even though this article isn't supposed to prepare a historic context for "A Requiem For Libricide" which is taking place somewhere free of place and time and even language; but the Manichaeistic echo in his work can not be denied. The similarities between Manichaeistic scribes who played a certain role in spreading words and those characters in Ettehad's piece can not remain unnoticed. It is not surprising that Ettehad's next play-script (the latest episode of confidence series- Ettehad's ongoing series) is about Mani. Mani was the one who could make a change in this land by the means of his publishing method; but it wasn't meant to happen. Safavid sultans also restricted the publishing industry for three hundred years. In that dark era which enlightenment was postponed for three hundred years, and in the absence of book and publishing machines; verbal traditions like mourning ceremony for Imam Hussain (the third Imam of Shia muslims) and tazia got established. Music which is one of the main pillars in "A Requiem For Libricide" find such a place in this play for the very same reason. Comparing to those forgotten traditions and written resources, music seems to remain intact. Though singing those poems by Khayyam in an atmosphere full of forgetfulness and disability of memory reminds of the very same policy of oblivion and destruction. The very same policy of

"Why, ne'er a peevish Boy

Would break the Bowl from which he drank in Joy; Shall He that made the Vessel in pure Love And Fancy, in an after Rage destroy!"

(Referring to Khayyam's poem).

It seems that Safavid policy is still alive in this land. There are still many problems in publishing industry. Still the verbal history overcomes the written one. "A Requiem For Libricide" is a requiem for three hundred years of silence that even thinking of it can drive one mad. A requiem for all those blind chances. It is a mourning for chances that lost one by one during history; since Mani till this very day.

#### PART IV

Perhaps when **Guillaume Apollinaire** -french poet- presented his collection of calligrams in respect of Chinese letters in 1917 and fore-tellingly talked about the termination of books in the next century; did not really think that 90 years later in an international conference in Douse in 2008 someone would talk about a future in which the trade of water substitutes the trade of oil and the termination of paper books till 2022. Though in Umberto Eco's mind -Italian semiologist and intellectual- whose one of main concerns was book burning and extinction of books; book was one of those inventions like hammer and saw that will last forever. The fact is that real book lovers can not stay indifferent to the present situation. The problem is not transformation of paper books into e-books and kindle and etc. but the fact that the number of book readers is decreasing each day. This issue doesn't specifically belong to Iran and is an international problem. The problem that caused an american collector to burn a number of his books recently in order to protest.

"A Requiem For Libricide" is a deep sympathy with those whose memories is filled with the holiness of vegetal memory. "A Requiem For Libricide" is full of Borquesian sensations that recognize heaven as a place full of books such as library. The piece is a sad admiration for those libraries that as Eco mentioned are the temples of vegetal memory. Memories that will be erased. Books that will be burned. Everything will be forgotten; even language, even book, even forgetfulness. The book will destroy itself and memory will be filled up with a confidential silence. It seems as though it is time for us to believe that books are not to be remained for the next generations and cry. It seems as though men have to find refuge in the memory of blood and flesh again or computers. "A Requiem For Libricide" is a sympathy and paying respect to book lovers as they are going to loose this cultural object. And more than that an answer to that obscured question that asks about the reason for literature.

This piece is a sympathy for those who are aware of the intertwined destiny of books and literature. Those who know that a world without literature will surrender to authorities.

#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Ali Ettehad is an artist, curator, art critic and a writer with numerous articles published in international publications.



A Requiem For Libricide, the music section of the event (3rd part). No. five, six and seven, performed by Naghme Moradabadi, Joobin Kalhor and Hamed Kazemi. Photo by Mousa Hashemzadeh