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Flowers for Natascha

natasha sadr haghghian//prisoners //old empires persia//
Captions. Source: AG. Found: Agent Directory (Confidential)
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File note:

In late November 2010, the Archive received a request from Natascha Sadr Haghghian, a valued associate. A friend of hers, the artist Mehraneh Atashi, had been released from prison in April, where, along with many others arrested at the same time that January, she had suffered badly for having taken photographs of protesters in the streets. When she was released, grudgingly, she was told to stop taking self-portraits and to take photographs of flowers instead; rather foolish advice, as it happens. Atashi had passed along to Sadr Haghghian a set of images – some photographs, some reproductions of paintings – relating to flowers, which were to be published the following May in a book whose English title, translated from the ancient Persian poem, was *Only the morning bird treasures the flower garden*. These images had no accompanying information identifying title, author, date, size, materials or subject matter. Natascha approached us to see if we could find the missing identifying information and provide it to her. I prepared the document myself and passed it on. For reasons explained elsewhere, the book project was compromised and aborted.



Fake sunflowers and blue sea with real flag and supreme leaders.

In France, the largest producer in Europe, I see fields and fields of sunflowers that draw the eye and sometimes the hand, outstretched just like that. I blame Van Gogh for the fact that sunflowers always seem like a visual cliché, although perhaps that's unfair. It is said that the sunflower symbolized the Inca's Sun Gods and that Francisco Pizarro y González, the first European to encounter the flower, stole its seeds and gold images of it for the Spanish Crown, in return for which he received what he called Peru. Suppressed in the 16th century by the Spanish for its pagan associations, today the sunflower is planted without permission in neglected public places on May 1st by Guerilla Gardeners in Europe, North America, and Asia.



Woman in red with flag and flowers crossing street.

This picture should remind me of Mao's Hundred Flowers Campaign but it does not. Perhaps it's the redness, or her stride, or the fog, I cannot say for certain. It is Laertes' lamenting voice describing his sister Ophelia that I recall: *A document in madness. Thoughts and remembrance fitted.* And then that terrifying scene presaging her drowning among tangled weeds, when Ophelia, now hearing voices and the "unshaped", gifts accursed flowers to Hamlet's mother Gertrude and the usurper King Claudius: *There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it "herb of grace" o' Sundays. Oh, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy, for unhappy love. I would give you some violets for faithfulness, but they withered all when my father died.*



Flower Power

Flower Power is still a foolish idea. Faced with the military police, armies of the weak fight with forged weapons or run. The baton can shatter a flower in an instant.



Nazi officers (Himmler facing) picking flowers in a black and white field outside Dachau.

There are reports of decorative flowers placed with a gentle touch in the anterooms of the gas chambers at Dachau. The most profound definition of acknowledgement I know of was given by Lawrence Weschler in his book, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*, about the disappearance of thousands by the state and paramilitary death squads in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. He said acknowledgement means “the sacramental transformation of information into publicly sanctioned truth.”



Roses for Stalin (1949) by Boris Eremeevich Vladimirski. Photo: Collection Horvath, Austria.

Roses are meant to make you think. In ancient Rome, when a wild rose was attached to a door, it signalled that secrets were being discussed on the other side. A flower as warning. Art students used to learn their craft by attempting to master the ability to paint a beautiful rose so lifelike you would reach out to hold its velvety leaves between your fingers. Now artists are moved to thinking thinking thinking about what's real by roses – a passionate feeling for thought that is as beautiful and thorny as the flower itself. Another secret too.



Dianthus by Adolf Hitler.

I'm not sure if this is one of the hundreds of postcards Hitler used to copy to sell to tourists when he was a poor young artist, twice rejected by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, as we've been told a million times. There is absolutely nothing of interest here except the signature, which forces us to look again for something more. The something more must come from elsewhere. In 1964, Leonard Cohen published a book of poetry entitled *Flowers for Hitler*. It begins with a note on the title. He writes:

*A
while ago
this book would
have been called
SUNSHINE FOR NAPOLEON
and earlier still it
would have been
called
WALLS FOR GENGHIS KHAN*



Josef Stalin and Saddam Hussein in white outfits holding flowers.

Despite the presence of the roses, this image shouts NOT THINKING! Not thinking that, whatever his intentions, Kristofer Paetau lied to the children in encouraging them to believe that if they ‘punished’ George Bush’s photograph by attacking it, this was equivalent to holding Bush accountable for being what Paetau called a ‘bad man.’ Not thinking that punishment is part of the ‘badness’ and not a solution to it. Not thinking in the hysterical response by one “Tom Brewitz/CornerMark” who misdiagnosed the trouble with Paetau’s project, blaming it on “Communists, Anarchists, Marxists, Maoists, Islammunists, and other Leftists” and who produced a tedious and exhausting montage of images and newspaper articles (from which this pair here is taken) designed to prove that if Stalin and Hussein wore the same mustache style or the same colour of outfit then they must be the same men or, even more idiotically, that if you look like Stalin you must be like Stalin. NOT THINKING! And if it turns out that this whole thing is some kind of art game, I will lie down covered with rose petals and sleep for days.



Young man face partially covered, tossing a bouquet of flowers as if it were a stone (wall where he normally resides missing) by Banksy.

Gaza was one of Europe’s main flower suppliers before the Israeli blockade in 2007 prohibited all exports and almost completely destroyed an industry with more than 100 flower farms and 7,000 farm workers, many of whom are women, located in Beit Lahia and in Rafah. Unable to sell the hundreds of thousands of flowers they have grown, farmers feed them to the cattle. In February 2009, Israel ‘permitted’ a shipment of flowers to Dutch auctions and also required that they be transported by Israeli exporters. Siege. Debt. Misery. If I were that boy, I’d throw those flowers back too.



The Extraction of the Stone of Madness (The Cure of Folly) by Hieronymus Bosch (c 1495). © Museo Nacional del Prado

Most art historians have treated this painting, which some claim Bosch did not paint himself, as an early, rather simplistic piece of satirical agit-prop designed to criticize the belief (mistakenly attributed to the popular classes) that idiocy or crazy behaviour could be cured if the stone that supposedly produced it were surgically removed from the head. Obviously, even in the complexly symbolized world of 15th-century European painting, a doctor wearing an upside-down tin funnel on his head uselessly supported by a priest clutching a jug of wine and a bored woman who is wearing rather than reading her book puts the lobotomy procedure in a rather dubious light. Most art and medical historians, the latter having taken a greater interest in the painting than the former, argue that the 'folly' of the cure of folly is definitively symbolized by the replacement of the stone by a flower. Not just any flower, but a tulip – three tulips, actually, for one is already lying on the table, and another forms the base of the table. We are told that 'tulip head' was common Dutch argot for a fool or an idiot, although legend has it that the first association of tulips and loose heads should be credited to a zealous Sultan who lavishly overspent on a tulip festival and subsequently 'lost his head' – literally or not I do not know.

The story of the Sultan leads to a number of other questions that are not discussed here, such as why roses are associated with thinking and tulips with not thinking. Or what role does Holland play in the global flower market and how did tulips get from Turkey, Iran, Syria and other parts of Central Asia – having first been cultivated by the Ottoman Empire – to northern Europe in the first place? And, what was that whole tulip mania episode about that ended in the financial crash of 1637, apart from being a propitious occasion for the great Persian poets and artists to create beautiful songs about and paintings of tulips?



Cutting out the Stone of Madness or an Operation on the Head (1568) by Pieter Breugel the Elder

Something is not quite right with the treatment of the painting as satire devolving into a pictorial joke (or even a pictogram) of the 'tulip head' Lubbert Das, a comical figure in Dutch literature, whose name appears in script on the frame. Maybe I see it this way because I can't get Pieter Breugel the Elder's stone of madness painting out of my head. *Cutting out the Stone of Madness or an Operation on the Head*, painted a year before he died in 1568, presents a violent and chaotic scene in which the patients are clearly captives, held against their will, in hospitals with cages like prisons, by authorities who were learning to use the cover of medical science, such as it was at the time, to call all sorts of behaviour they didn't like, didn't want or didn't understand 'madness', 'idiocy', 'folly' and to attempt to remove it by force. Maybe I see it this way because although the man does not appear to be bound against his will and his shoes are neatly placed under his chair as if he were comfortably at home in the bucolic landscape in which he sits, there's a gallows in the background, barely but still visible.

Maybe I see it this way because it's hard today not to look at this painting without recalling the words that open Michel Foucault's great book *Madness and Civilization*, a work in which Bosch's ships of fools and dances of death figure prominently: "We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbours, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness; to define the moment of this conspiracy before it was permanently established in the realm of truth, before it was revived by the lyricism of protest... We must try to return... to that... uncomfortable region... that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease... to write the archaeology of that silence."

Perhaps if we see Bosch's flowers as part of *the archaeology of that silence*, we might learn the role flowers have played in the conspiracy Foucault describes. Certainly, it would be folly, crazy even, to treat as innocent a flower extracted knife in hand, or, given in circumstances where neighbours confine each other, and mercilessness is the sovereign language of reason.