

## art Circle

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ART.

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### Ritual of Recollection: Barbad Golshiri and Mim Kaf Mim Aleph

By: Roshanak Keyghobadi | November 2013

...از خاک در آمدیم و  
 بر باد شدیم...  
 عمر خیام

**...We were ascended from the soil  
 and blown by the wind...  
 Omar Khayyam**

It is estimated that around 146,357 people die each day in the world. Some may be buried individually or in mass graves cremated or not buried. Most burials and mourning rituals bring closure for those who are left behind.

A computerized search on Behesht Zahra's[i] website provides the exact location of a grave (section, row and number) as well as the information on the tombstone (first name, last name, father's first name, date of birth and date of death). Family members of the deceased may also add poems and photos (framed or etched) to the tombstones. By marking a location and providing specific information, a tombstone not only becomes a proof for a

life once existed on earth and a site for identification but also is a way that family and friends can locate and visit the deceased and become engaged in their ceremonies of respect and remembrance.

Barbad Golshiri's portable stencil flat iron tombstone masterfully facilitates the ritual of recollection for the family of a man who was denied a tombstone. As it is explained in the catalogue of his recent exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery<sup>[ii]</sup>,

*"The stenciled text narrates the labyrinthine death of a man who for political reasons could never have a tombstone on his grave. His family asked the artist to make a tombstone for him and the artist made an ephemeral tomb for their loved one. Each time the family visits the cemetery they bring along the stenciled tombstone with them, place it on the grave and stealthily pour soot powder on it. The text is thus imprinted and depending on the wind strength vanishes in a few hours or a few days. The act is repeated as a ritual.*

*The epitaph reads in Persian:*

*Here Mim Kaf Aleph does not rest. He is dead. Layer beneath layer dead. Depth beyond depth. Each time deeper. Each death deeper. Stone upon stone. Each stone a death. Mim Kaf Mim Aleph has no stone. Has never had. No trace of it [also: so be it]. Never in all deaths. December came and Mim Kaf Mim Aleph was no longer [there]. Is not."*

By denying Mim Kaf Mim Aleph a permanent tombstone in a specific location, his grave (which can now be anywhere, although he is buried in one specific place) becomes an active and mobile site of remembrance and takes on a nomadic life. If the denial of a tombstone was an act of obliteration, the stencil tombstone becomes a tool for visibility, liberation and constant renewal and recall.

The ritual of spreading the soot over the stencil tombstone is reminiscence of the ceremonies of spreading ashes of cremated bodies over land or water, when upon their release ashes disappear in the space and cannot be assembled again. Yet the act of spreading soot on the grave and over the iron stencil gives shape to letters, words and sentences which all describe and point to the fact that this particular site is not an ordinary site and a body is buried underneath. The ritual gives identity to an unidentified grave and the enigmatic narrative transforms the epitaph into a riddle to be solved. Only the family of the man knows the full answer, only they know the details of a life that is no more.

Barbad Golshiri's *The Untitled Tomb* can be interpreted based on where it is located/displayed. In the hands of Mim Kaf Mim Aleph's family it is a private and practical tool for performing their visitation rites. In a gallery space it is a public and aesthetic object standing on its own with no relationship to its original location and context yet with close connection to the other tombstones created by Golshiri in his *Curriculum Mortis*.

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Image: Barbad Golshiri, *The Untitled Tomb*, 2012. Iron, soot. 60.5 x 135 x 0.2 cm. Edition of 3 + 1AP.

Also see: <http://www.barbadgolshiri.com>

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[i] Behesht Zahara is the largest cemetery in Iran located in south part of Tehran which was established in 1970. It is around 540 hectares and has close to 1,400,000 graves. <http://beheshtezahra.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=92>

[ii] *Curriculum Mortis* exhibition by Barbad Golshiri was on view at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York from September 7 to October 26, 2013. <http://www.thomaserben.com>