A Place a.k.a. Kurdistan – Time-exposing the Shadow of History

> *"Today Kurdistan does not exist on the map. Since 1918, the Kurds' homeland has remained divided among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and what is now the former U.S.S.R. In each country the Kurds have been continuously threatened with either assimilation or extermination. But as a place, Kurdistan exists in the minds of more than twenty million people, the largest ethnic people in the world without a state of its own."*[1]

In calm and sunny Vienna, on a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 2015, I found three women in their fifties sitting on the stairs leading up to our exhibition[2], which was closed on that day – they had clearly been waiting for quite a while already for someone to let them in. I was about to tell them that they would have to come back another day within the visiting hours, but it was obvious that they weren't usual exhibition visitors: They had made the effort of coming all the way, and were patiently waiting to see the show. So I invited them to come in, turned the lights on for them, started the videos and the sound works. They already knew which work they wanted to see, though, as one of the women led the others to one wall on which a large, borderless map had been painted, showing a region from Greece to Iran, from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf, with booklets attached, suspended from wires: Susan Meiselas' installation *akaKurdistan*. Sohaile, a former *Peshmerga* from Iraqi Kurdistan, had brought her friends to proudly show them the one booklet that told her own story: How she became a guerilla, and how she counseled "women about their rights, choice of spouse, bride price and how to withdraw from a forced wedding."[3] – the story contained in one booklet, out of many.

When Susan Meiselas arrived to Northern Iraq in 1991, Sohaile had already fled the region with her baby daughter to take shelter from Saddam Hussein's bombing campaigns during the Iran-Iraq war. Susan had come to join Human Rights Watch in an effort to document the destruction of Kurdish villages – some of which had been attacked with chemical weapons by Hussein during 1988 – and the uncovering of mass graves.[4]

Her experiences there led Susan to begin work on a visual history of the Kurds which would result in the book *Kurdistan – In the Shadow of History,* a unique and comprehensive compilation of memories of a people that has no state, and no national archive. It brings together the accounts of those who fled and those who stayed, and calls travelers, merchants, missionaries, bureaucrats as witnesses of a history that is perpetually in peril of erasure by denial.

Kurdistan has a tangled history full of complexities; as a consequence of World War I the region inhabited by the Kurds to this day is split among four nation states that were founded at that time. Since then, a perpetual and multi-national struggle for self-determination has continued in the region. The fate of the Kurds has been repeatedly instrumentalized by regional or global powers, and locally manipulated by the opposing forces at play in the countries that are inhabited by Kurdish people. These cynical dynamics have affected the lives of the civilians dramatically, and render the process of reassembling the true histories of Kurdistan a highly involved endeavor, to which Susan's book is a significant contribution.

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[1] Susan Meiselas, *KURDISTAN In the Shadow of History*, The University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 2017, p.xv

[2] *Mobilising Memory,* Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria

[3] Excerpted from the booklet of Sohalia, as part of *akaKURDISTAN* piece by Susan Meiselas

[4] Cover text, *KURDISTAN In the Shadow of History*. The University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 2007.

Dutch anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen, a leading expert on Kurdish society and history, provided the historical introductions that accompany the chronologically structured narration of the book, carefully covering the histories of the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian parts of Kurdistan with the aim of creating a holistic understanding of the larger context. During the century preceding the publication of the book in 1997, the Kurds in all the aforementioned countries had gone through countless atrocities, and their struggles all too often had ended in tremendous loss, displacement, and massacre.

For the second edition, ten years later in 2007, van Bruinessen was able to add a cautiously optimistic postscript, updating the reader about the developments that had taken place in the meantime. For the first time in generations, a truly positive perspective on the future had emerged both in the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq, as well as due to the increased civil and cultural rights promised to the Kurds by Tayyip Erdoğan's AK party government in Turkey.

All the more painful however it is to revisit the hopeful mood of the postscript today, in 2017, after another ten years of human history have been made. The dynamics in the dominant countries have changed for many rather unpredictable reasons, and the world had to witness an outrageous amount of displacement and loss of life in the region. Among all the affected people, once more a large number of Kurds had to go through traumatic experiences. The emergence of ISIS as a result of the 2003 Iraq War and the dictatorial regime in Syria caused terrible fates among the Kurdish population in Syria and Iraq. The unexpected changes in the mechanics of political power in Turkey have brought back the suppression and horror of previous decades to the Kurdish towns in the southeast of Turkey, to an extent that is in many ways worse than what is so well-described in the *Kurdistan* book. Now, the future of the Kurdish people, especially in Iran, Syria, and Turkey, appears trapped in a dark void; meanwhile history bitterly repeats itself, yet again casting its overwhelming shadow on the people of this unrecognized nation. In Iraq on the other hand, more hopeful developments are taking place: the independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan is scheduled to finally take place on 25 September 2017. It had been announced and delayed several times, after originally having been planned for 2014.

In addition to Susan Meiselas' own photographs, *Kurdistan* juxtaposes a wealth of materials, both photographic and textual, from diverse perspectives, both primary accounts and representations of events in the media. The book thus succeeds at conserving images, memories, thoughts, evidence, and discourse in an instructive and emphatic way. Meiselas recalls aspects of her research process in the following way: "Over time, my role divided between maker and collector. I stopped taking photographs, except to reproduce existing family photos with a Polaroid system. I felt immense pleasure sitting with families, first peeling off a positive image, then watching with my host as the negative appeared in the tray of sodium solution. Their precious originals stayed with them, but they allowed us to make copies to take away. These were privileged moments: to be invited inside, to listen to the storytellers, then to eat and sleep on their floors. Everywhere we were strangers, yet we were welcomed with trust as soon as people understood that they were contributing to a collective memory."[5]

After completing her extensive anthology in 1997, a large number of documents and personal stories kept reaching Susan, so she felt the urge of transcending the rigid and completed nature of a history book and generate a more borderless space for collective

[5] Susan Meiselas, KURDISTAN In the Shadow of History, The University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 2017, Introduction

memory. She therefore designed *akaKurdistan* as a web-based archive and an extension of the book, as a platform for – hopefully – sustainable participation. The website, which provides a timeline of significant and mostly tragic events from the early 1900s up to today, is still an ongoing project that will serve as one of only few archives of the collective history of Kurdistan, probably until an official archive can finally be founded.

Conceived long before the age of Wikipedia, Google Maps, Instagram or smartphones, the site acted as a virtual archive built from contributed photographs and stories that, in a time of political repression, were only deemed safe in cyberspace. With its web-design aesthetic representing the late nineties, *akaKurdistan* is now a testament to crucial, early developments in new collective historiographical practices made possible by digital technology. Unidentified photographs unearthed during research for the book, as well as pictures submitted by online visitors, are presented on the site along with the stories behind the images, bearing witness to the ongoing oppression of Kurds and Kurdish memory.

As it turned out however, the space provided by the online platform was not entirely safe or peaceful either: The website was brutally attacked and hacked many times. In addition to that, it is subject to censorship: It has been blocked until today by the Turkish authorities, among others. As we know better today, it is in fact rather difficult to build a truly reliable, lasting, accountable and anonymous online platform, and guarantee safe access to it despite censorship and mass surveillance. Cyberspace, we know now, is a very vulnerable and dangerous place when it comes to sheltering a controversial archive.

The *akaKurdistan* material was cast into an exhibition format that started travelling among museums and other respected art institutions already a year before the book appeared, and continued its journeys until 2003, when the US-led invasion of Iraq took place. This extension of the archive into the physical world enabled new and wider audiences to physically experience the captivating stories that had lied in the shadows. Today, two decades after the foundation of the website, we are so overwhelmed and saturated by the endless stream of Internet buzz that the physicality of an exhibition architecture, the encounter with the exhibited photographs and booklets, the act of reading the stories in a public space, is a far more engaging process than browsing a webpage. The online platform allows for participation by a larger quantity of readers and storytellers, but the experience of a more physical encounter with the personal stories is undoubtedly more intimate.

In the exhibition format, in addition to the archival material, the work contains an unofficial political map of Kurdistan, with booklets hanging from thin chains pinned to the map (originally, Meiselas used the map that had been presented to the 1945 United Nations San Francisco Conference by the Kurdish League delegation). The material presented in these booklets was sent by contributors from around the world and consists of personal stories and eyewitness accounts, poems and pictures, as well as exchanges with the artist about experiences and memories from the Kurdish region – as indicated by their localization on the historic map. In addition to that, site-specific rooms were introduced to gather local stories from the diaspora. In words and images, a number of deeply traumatic experiences of violence are being shared; the individual booklets allow for that sharing to take place by providing an intimate space between the witness and the reader. The overall arrangement of the work interconnects the highly personal and fragile accounts and stages them as a resilient public document that cannot be denied or ignored. The work was exhibited at a large scale from 1996 to 2003, and then was condensed to an excerpted form after the majority of the material had been returned to those who had loaned it, until the major exhibitions at International Center of Photography, New York, in 2008 and now at Galerie

nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, that are the subject of this publication allowed to reassemble the material in a new, more comprehensive format.

In the spring of 2014, a group of academics, artists and curators that I had the honor of being part of decided to bring the work to Istanbul, in the framework of the first edition of an exhibition series entitled *Mobilizing Memory: Women Witnessing*, which took place at *Depo*[6], one of only very few art spaces that would provide room for critical voices in Turkey. A number of works were exhibited that critically dealt with sensitive subject matters – such as the Armenian Genocide, Kurdistan, or state violence – but prominently displaying a political map of Kurdistan was clearly beyond what was feasible in the political context of Turkey. At the same time, we felt that a borderless map would actually represent well the ideals and imaginations, as well as the reality, that the inhabitants of Kurdistan had lived with for a long time, both in the region and the Kurdish diaspora.

The Istanbul exhibition happened to take place during a tipping point in the recent history of the region: In the year preceding the opening, the Gezi Park protests had energized the progressive youth in Turkey's major cities, and an electrifying determination to shape the future together could be felt in the so-called *forums* that were spontaneously organized across the country. In a remarkable development, the pro-Kurdish HDP party had evolved into an alliance not only of Kurds, but of an eclectic set of movements, encompassing environmentalists, LGBTQ people, concerned urban planners, social and cultural workers, workers' and human rights activists, and progressive city dwellers of all shades and colors. HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş had challenged Erdoğan in the presidential election the week before the exhibition opening, and the HDP would finally pass the 10% quota and enter the parliament half a year later, in the June 2015 general election. At the same time however, ISIS had launched the siege of the Kurdish-majority city of Kobanî in northern Syria, and pro-Kobanî demonstrations unfolded in Turkey that were quickly met with tear gas and water cannons. A number of military incidents between Turkish forces and PKK militants in southeastern Turkey resulted in several casualties and contributed to the escalation; after the former negotiated 'peace process' had collapsed.[7] These events foreshadowed the rapid re-escalation of violence in southeastern Turkey, accompanied by systematic repression and incarceration of Kurdish leaders (including Demirtaş and most HDP members of parliament) and advocates of peace and human rights in the region, such as, among others, the signatories of the "Academics for Peace" petition. The mutilating logic and rhetoric along the dichotomy of terrorism and counter-insurgency has once more taken hold of the region.

During the production of the second edition of the exhibition in Vienna, Austria, a fourth extension and incarnation of Susan's work evolved: Like many other cities in Europe and around the globe, Vienna is the home of a sizeable Kurdish diaspora; over several generations, a diverse range of people had emigrated or fled their homelands, to seek safety and stability elsewhere, taking their experiences and knowledge with them. It therefore appeared self-evident to try to connect to members of the diaspora, and build a platform to share and bring together their personal memories. These contributions as the outcome of the collaborative process would eventually be added to the *akaKurdistan* work, associating them with a particular place – one the storytellers remembered, a reflection on an

[6] Mobilizing Memory: Women Witnessing, 5 September – 3 October, 2014, Depo, Istanbul, Curators: Ayse Gül Altinay - Isin Önol

[7] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29526783

encounter, or where they now live – on the map that we were about to paint on a wall of the exhibition space.

Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki, Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, German, and English were spoken during the workshops that took place in the week leading up to the exhibition opening; volunteer translators enabled the conversations. The Kurdish participants had come from southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and northwestern Iran. They had fled during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s – decades which all saw an abundance of tragic events – as well as very recently, after the latest attacks in Syria and Iraq. They all defined themselves as Kurdish and felt a belonging to Kurdistan, yet did not share a common language, or a common past. Nevertheless, they all dreamed of living freely in their homelands – although for all of them, the memory of that homeland was associated with tragedy. In the Vienna workshop, the participants discovered similarities between their experiences, be it in the mountains, the cities, suburbs, or remote villages, in war and in peace. In this way, an exchange emerged among members of the Kurdish diaspora that – at least for a brief while – transcended generations, fortunes, languages, and political views. Subsequently, Susan went on to organize workshops in many other places, including Frankfurt, Rome, Barcelona, and Paris; the workshops were conceived to be just before the exhibitions so that new stories would get added to the Kurdistan wall.

Since the start of Susan's work on Kurdistan in the early 90s, developments in technology and accessibility of information substantially altered the nature of the work: Collecting images is no longer difficult – on the contrary: Today, all the workshop participants who have just recently migrated from the Kurdish regions bring smartphones full of often very graphic images and videos, documenting the extents of the atrocities they witnessed and experiences they made. Today, everyone who has to flee from their home will try to have a smartphone with them, indispensable tools for navigation, being connected, and exchanging information with others that are in a similar situation.

Remarkably, digital images have entirely replaced the cherished analog photographs that would have been carried by every migrant until not too long ago; solely smartphones are now being entrusted with keeping our visual mementos. In the workshops, those participants who had just recently arrived from war zones usually would present many images to summarize what they witnessed throughout the journey. Stored in their phones, they would carry the devastation of their own destroyed villages along with their family albums. In contrast to the countless images that can be found on the Internet, these ones would come with very personal narrations and emotional expressions. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the recent history of the world has been largely documented using smartphones and kept on personal hard drives as well as on the Internet. While it used to be difficult to obtain images to accompany personal stories in the 90s, today we are faced with a bombardment of images. The key question that the workshops try to tackle is how to communicate these personal image archives and stories in a more permanent, narrative form, to weave the personal stories into a shared and public history.

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Susan Meiselas' commitment to recording and amplifying the voices of the unheard led her to develop the *Kurdistan* endeavor into four distinct formats over the years: the book, online archive, workshops and exhibitions. The complexity of the issues, the large number of people involved, and the gravity of their stories made it necessary for the project to grow from a book into an ongoing, interpersonal exchange. History unfolds, as a ravel of tangled

events and accounts, and it is only after a long time that historians manage to comb the developments into a coherent narrative. What happens to the individuals under the suppressive regimes of dominating powers? What can personal stories tell us, as opposed to the reasoning of any official rationale? These questions are omnipresent in Susan's work; across media she creates spaces for exchanges among diverse people, employing artistic, journalistic and scholarly strategies, yet unconditionally grounded in a determination to encounter humans in sincerity. It is her sincerity that encourages people to communicate their personal experiences, and her mastery in cultural forms that allows the personal stories to become part of a collective memory.

A shadow is an ephemeral entity that causes temporary invisibility. Its existence depends on a number of participants: A light source, an obstructing shape, and a surface to accommodate the ensuing absence of luminosity. When any of these actors changes, the form of the shadow follows, if it does not dissolve entirely. "The Shadow of History" in that respect entails both: The experience of total exposure to tracelessness. – And the rightful optimism that it is not a rigid, immutable form that determines the future. Embracing this optimism, *akaKurdistan* therefore suggests a space for memories and evidences to be gathered and preserved, until history can be re-written, at last free from the blaring impositions and deceits of those who seek to dominate.

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New York, May 2017