

Underneath, it's all poetry: Tooraj Khamenehzadeh's *I'm not a song to be sung*  
By Natasha Chuk

Bodies appear floating amid a murky blue background of a three-channel installation, seemingly out of nowhere. They linger for a moment to stare into the camera, gazes fixed, limbs dangling, then disappear, vanishing just as mysteriously as they arrived. The subjects are underwater, making their appearance in the frames especially unusual and haunting. They float away like ghosts. Then they return, descending one by one, and proceed to recite inaudible lines from a poem. Others follow and do the same, one by one, a total of ten, a mix of men and women, all Iranian, floating down and making a direct address to the camera. Their faces are dominated by rapt concentration—eyes rarely blinking—as they negotiate the power between mind and body to keep themselves underwater, against nature, and against everything. We see their mouths moving—and air bubbles furiously make patterns around them—but their voices drown in the atmospheric sound of water, and it muffles their words. This recitation, delivered against all odds, produces a kind of silent howl, a suppressed outcry.

Tooraj Khamenehzadeh's short, experimental video, *I'm not a song to be sung*, engages an aesthetics of protest: meaning is deferred, perhaps entirely denied, and one can't help but initially feel both empathy for the suffering of the subjects and self-pity for having witnessed and suffered alongside them. Watching this short video is like recalling the recurring nightmare many of us have, which finds us helplessly battling against an unexplained force that induces a physical disability, preventing us from controlling our own movement or speech. (In fact, this nightmare is often characterized by silent screams.) This is our subconscious mind processing a real-life frustration, a sneaky response to our lack of agency and empowerment in our everyday lives. Khamenehzadeh's work approaches us in our awakened state, where we are differently vulnerable, with a visceral confrontation with the familiar but imaginary battle of our minds at fitful rest. Or, rather, the artwork is a collective nightmare placed before our eyes, only this time, it is defined by the willingness of its participants.

Yet, immediately following this initial feeling of distress emerges a profound realization: these subjects are exercising a particular right to defy their circumstances and to do something that is neither comfortable nor logical, but is, for these reasons, the most compelling vehicle to deliver a message of protest. Songs are meant to be sung—loudly, gracefully, with emotion—except in situations that prove unstable, broken, and uncertain. Water creates such a collision of forces, resulting in difficulty, hazard, and endangerment, not least physical discomfort and the technical inability to deliver an oral message easily. The mind, body, and voice work together to generate sound, but water suppresses its transmission, meeting it at the source and muffling its form and articulation to the point of unintelligibility. The camera records with indifference, while we stare into the eyes of the participants in an attempt to meet them and their muffled words halfway.

So how are we to make sense of this work when its central message has been distorted beyond recognition and only its title offers a clue? A song is best sung in conditions that permit sound to travel clearly and enthusiastically. A song isn't expected to be silenced or muffled. Interference would defeat its purpose, destroying its message as it travels incoherently. But Khamenezhdeh never promised us anything as easy as comfort in the delivery of this video's central meaning and intent. In fact, he frames his message directly into the title of the work, which is a line from the poem *Collective Love* by Ahmad Shamlou.

Shamlou, pen name A. Bambad, was one of the most influential modern Iranian poets who ushered a new complexity and abstraction in this celebrated medium during the 20th century. This makes his work

an apt choice to represent the group's plight, struggle, and desires. His own complicated and rebellious background is invoked in this work's subversive exercise. The participants take part in honoring a rich history and acknowledge its relevance to their current situation by reciting the poem in its entirety.

The line, *I'm not a song to be sung*, invokes Marshall McLuhan's most celebrated adage, the medium is the message. The significance of this work doesn't lie simply in what the participants are saying, but equally in how they are saying it. In that sense, the message is the underwater recitation and the participants' distorted words borrowed from a revolutionary poet in his own right. Choosing this environment as a platform is in itself a kind of refusal; and thus, the message also is refusal.

*I'm not a song to be sung* channels the creative sensibilities of neorealism and expressionism in an imaginative blend in a combination that is part experimental, part theatrical, and part documentary video. The ten subjects are friends and acquaintances of Khamenezhadeh. They represent a certain age, a certain life, and a certain history of Iranian culture. They deliver a collective unheard voice—of the past, present, and future—in an environment that simulates the kind of suspension, distress, and frustration they experience, as well as their collective and individual resilience to their circumstances. In fact, it's easy to forget the water is there, and that the subjects are immersed in it, save for the occasional hair that drifts and waves up and away from the face. Khamenezhadeh's camera is fixed, narrowing context and disguising the hallmarks of water, like air bubbles, waves, and flow. The subjects also seem to ignore it, almost casually rejecting the limits of their environment and its effects on their breathing. The water becomes their home, their new normal, as banal as the air the rest of us breathe. Bodies float down and address the camera, but they eventually float back up, to the surface, to safety, which remains out of view, off-screen, out there somewhere. One subject remains underwater for a noticeably longer period of time: his eyes fixed, his hands clenched, his body defiant, persistent despite everything.

Refusal here is a kind of dissent, disapproval and discord in all its forms. Dissatisfaction in the form of resistance is explored literally and figuratively in this work: it presents us with the idea of a song that isn't meant to be sung; voices reciting a poem that aren't intended to be heard; bodies that aren't designed for life without air; meaning that isn't easily communicated. The Latin prefix "dis" — as in dissent, disapproval, discord, and so on — has a negative or reversing force. In musical terms, we recognize this in the form of dissonance. Though associated with unpleasantness in music theory, dissonance allows for its own kind of resolution and, more significantly, it is an important form of release and expression. Sounds produced underwater serve as a kind of dissonance, giving the medium of water its own poetic license. Though it distorts vocal language—each orator's efforts are dismissed by the garbled designations between their words—water blends expressively, reducing all phonic material to the same level, obscuring evenly without preference. Of course, dissonance in music is appreciated through and because of its relation to its counterpart, consonance. The subversive poeticism of water seems to be this work's consonance.

Water has a similarly elegiac effect on images. As a medium, it filters the visual data the camera collects, forcing the apparatus to bend to its will and deliver us a compromised translation of what it would ordinarily capture. The result is a haunting, silky coating that seemingly hovers over the surface of the material, like an outer layer that separates us from the subjects. Daguerreotypes, a nineteenth-century photographic process, share this layered, ethereal quality. Their subjects gaze back at us seemingly like apparitions. Unlike daguerreotypes, however, whose silvery, polished, mirrored surfaces are reflective, Khamenezhadeh's underwater images aren't reflective at all. They seem to absorb and take in, almost beguilingly, producing a hazy blue that both evokes melancholy and calm, a quiet composure. Still the

subjects gaze back through this gauzy surface, similarly removed and otherworldly, as if caught between here and there, or here and somewhere. We are on the outside looking in.

This aquatic stage—with its muted color, its obfuscating effects, and its limits on the body— is no deterrent for the perseverance of the participants. Their silent words call out to us, actually summon us, if not to join them, then at least to bear witness to their struggle. Though we can't make out their words, we are compelled to heed them. Overall, the work leaves us with many questions, but also with an undeniably strong impression, imparting a trace of meaning, muffled and foggy, a message predicated on courage, love, and hope.

For my voice is / Intimate with yours