

Revolutions through the eyes of Shirin Neshat



Fig. 1: Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes* (detail), in *Unveiling* series, 1993. Ink on black and white gelatin silver print, 133 x 92.1 cm. Photo taken by Plauto. Copyright of Shirin Neshat, Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery.

18th April 2019

Word count: 8,999

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Director of Studies for her encouragement and inspiring advice. My specialist Supervisor and Naciem Nikkhah for their unfailing help. I would also like to thank the Marco Noire Gallery, Turin, and the Castello di Rivoli for accessing their archives. All my friends and family who have supported me and read numerous times my scripts. Least, but not last, I would like to thank Shirin Neshat and Giulia Theodoli for answering some of my questions.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's own.

Note on Transliteration: I have used the scholarly International Journal of Middle East Studies Transliteration System for Persian.

The literary appendix (not included in the word count and exempted by permission) was possible most especially through the help of Naciem Nikkhah who translated the inedited photographed tag in *Hassan* (fig. 23) and the poem by Simin Behbahani quoted on *Mana* (fig. 17). The other poems in the appendix have been included for the reader's clarity. The texts are the exact translations of the Farsi inscribed on the photographs. It presents the texts lined as on the images, which is an unedited approach to Neshat's inscribed texts.

Many thanks also to Heliya Haq for her support in the comprehension and individuation of some of the texts.

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Introduction

While my art metaphorically documents political history, it remains non-ideological; it frames questions without ever providing answers.¹

In 2015, Shirin Neshat's first large exhibition in the Middle East opened at the Mathaf, Doha. In an interview with the exhibition's curator, Abdellah Karroum, Neshat spoke about the relationship between art and history: "I guess I am interested in history not so much as a way to document political events but as a way to study the power of the human spirit in light of struggle and survival in times of tyranny",² and about the non-ideological character of her own art practice, as cited above. Neshat's art aims to frame questions rather than provide answers. This dissertation follows those terms and sets out to analyse the way her work "metaphorically documents political history"¹, and how this is facilitated by a performativity which unfolds in the gestures of the sitters in Neshat's photographs, as well as the one encouraged in the eyes of the spectator. I focus on her work from 1994-1997, 2012 and 2013, considering the role of metaphor and the performative as played out in her exploration of moments of political revolution.

The title of this dissertation refers to the centrality of the 1979 revolution in Iran, the 2009 Green Movement and the Arab Spring in Egypt (2011-2013) as the backdrop of the three photographic series under analysis, respectively *Women of Allah* (1994-1997), *The Book of Kings* (2012) and *Our House Is on Fire* (2013). The relationship with the eye of the camera and Neshat's eyes is the means through which these revolutions are photographed as political and cultural events. *Offered Eyes*, (fig. 1), underlines the implicit aspect of performativity in Neshat's work as the eye is the artist's

¹ Shirin Neshat, in Karroum and Leonore-Namkha Beschi, exh. catalogue, *Shirin Neshat: Afterwards*, Doha and Milano, 2015, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

own, inscribed by her hand to bear Forough Farrokhzad's poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' (see literary appendix, p. 56).³ This photograph symbolises the unity of Neshat's eye and the eye of the camera.

Shirin Neshat works with photography, video and film. Based in New York, she has filmed globally. Born in Qazvin in 1957, Iran, she moved to the U.S. at the age of seventeen to attend UC Berkeley, in 1975.⁴ Her return to Iran, in 1990, served as a catalyst of her artistic production, which was also informed by her experience as co-director of the interdisciplinary space Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York (1982-1992). Neshat describes her return to Iran as "one of the most shocking experiences I have ever had. [...] The difference between what I had remembered from the Iranian culture and what I was witnessing was enormous. [...] When I returned to the States, I was haunted by the experience and started to travel to Iran regularly."⁵ It was in the midst of these travels that Neshat produced her most famous series, *Women of Allah*, which she acknowledged was a means to explore and personally comprehend Iran's transformation.⁶

Neshat is not a spokesperson of Iran but an artist of the transnational diaspora. Her most recent film *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017) centres on the singer of the Middle East defined as "the voice of Egypt".⁷ While the political and social content of

³ Farrokhzad (1934-1967) is one of the most famous Iranian women poet, Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh, *Forugh Farrokhzad: Poet of Modern Iran*, London and New York, 2010, p. 1.

⁴ Scott MacDonald, 'Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat', in *Feminist Studies*, Fall 2004, p. 6.

⁵ Shadi Sheybani, 'Women of Allah: A conversation with Shirin Neshat', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, No. 38, Vol. 2, spring 1999, p. 206.

⁶ Neshat, 'Women of Allah: Secret Identities', in *Grand Street*, No. 62, Fall 1997, pp. 140-145.

⁷ Kulthum (1898-1975), see Virginia Danielson, 'The Voice of Egypt: The Artists' Work and Shared Aesthetics', chapter 6 in *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago, 1997, pp. 126-146.

her work is site-specific, Neshat consistently presents global issues which confront the viewer, literally face-to-face. Since 2012 her photographic series such as *The Book of Kings* and *Our House Is on Fire* have related once again to political activism.⁸

Of the *Women of Allah* series Neshat explains: “My focus from the beginning was the subject of women in relation to the Iranian society and the revolution, so I produced a series of photographic images that explored that topic”⁹. On 16th January 1979, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979), the monarch of Iran, fled the country, after two years of demonstrations against his philo-Western government. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was at the forefront of the opposition to the Shah, was invited back to Iran after his exile in France. On the 1st April 1979, a national referendum established the Islamic Republic and Khomeini became its Supreme Leader in December 1979. Numerous events forestalled the revolution, not least the 1953 *coup d'état*, in which the British MI6 and the American CIA ousted the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeh. Khomeini was not the only leader, but there were other organisations, such as the secular National Front and the People’s Mujahedin – the latter was the most powerful guerrilla group. After Khomeini’s rise to power, the Mujahedin due to their leftist Islamist take were killed or jailed by the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ On 22nd September 1980, Iraq’s invasion of Iran provoked eight years of war between the two countries.¹¹ The Iranian government developed a strong ideology

⁸ The video *Turbulent (Bi-Qarar)* (1998) won the Golden Lion Award in 1999, at the Venice Biennale. The film *Women Without Men* (2009), won the Silver Lion Award at the 66th Venice International Film Festival, 2009.

⁹ Neshat, quoted in Octavio Zaya, ed., *Shirin Neshat: La última palabra/The Last Word*, Milano, 2005, p. 41.

¹⁰ On the 1979 Revolution see Charles Kurzman, *The unthinkable revolution in Iran*, Cambridge (USA), 2005, pp. 1-12.

¹¹ On the war see Rob Johnson, *The Iran-Iraq War*, New York, 2011, pp. 3-12.

of martyrdom and promoted the wearing of the hijab as the veil was also used to distinguish Shi'i (Iranian) from Sunni (Iraqi) Muslims.¹²

The Green Movement in Iran (2009) is the political and historical context Neshat addressed in *The Book of Kings*: “while I was not active or even present in Iran during the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution, I did participate in many political activities in 2009 by supporting the young Iranians fighting for democracy [...]. So making *The Book of Kings* was my way of paying a tribute to this wonderful movement, as well as the Arab Spring, which quickly followed the Green Movement and spread throughout the Middle East.”¹³ The Green Movement started after the rigging of the tenth presidential election, 12th June, to prolong Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s conservative government. When the result of the election was announced, thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of Tehran shouting “Where is my vote?”¹⁴ The Green Movement, young revolutionaries that aimed at opposing the dictatorship of the clerics that gained increasing power after 1979, associated with the colour green representing the Prophet and Islam.¹⁵ Although they were violently repressed and killed by the government, it was the first spark for the events of the Arab Spring.

The aftermath of the Arab Spring in Egypt (2011-2013) inspired Neshat’s *Our House Is on Fire*: “I realized, I wished to capture very different images – elderly, impoverished Egyptians, men and women. Their facial expressions supply a narrative

¹² On the veil in Iran see Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*, chapter 4 ‘Iranian Politics and the Hijab’ and 5 ‘Militarizing the Veil’, pp. 88-137.

¹³ Neshat, in Melissa Chiu, ‘Poetic History: An Interview with Shirin Neshat’, in Chiu and Melissa Ho, eds., *Shirin Neshat: Facing History*, Washington, 2015, p. 36.

¹⁴ Dabashi, ed., *The Green Movement in Iran*, New Brunswick and London, 2011, p. 10; and Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁵ On the Green Movement see Fatemeh Sadeghi, ‘The Green Movement: A Struggle against Islamist Patriarchy?’, in Negin Nabavi, ed., *Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement*, New York, 2012, pp. 123-136.

to Egypt's recent history: the hardship of life under poverty, political injustice, corruption, chaos, violence and loss of loved ones"¹⁶. On the 25th January, the annual Egyptian Police Holiday, various youth groups demanded the overthrow of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in power since 1981. Violent clashes resulted in numerous deaths; they protested against dictatorship and lack of freedom. On 11th February 2011, Mubarak resigned and Egypt was left in the hands of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces until June 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood took power through the election of Mohammed Morsi to the presidency. A new wave of protests broke out when Morsi attempted to pass a religious-based constitution. On 3rd July 2013, Morsi was deposed by a *coup d'état* organised by the Minister of Defense, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who was then elected President in 2014.¹⁷

While the *Women of Allah* has been widely analysed by scholars, the other two series have received relatively little attention, but are essential to understanding Neshat's mutating representation of revolutions during these two intense decades of political upheaval. One of her most acclaimed and criticised exhibitions took place at the Annina Noisei Gallery, New York, in 1995. The work combined two earlier series *Unveiling* (1993-1994) and *Women of Allah*. Unlike previous group photographs of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, published in newspapers and in the American media, Neshat's photographs were individual portraits of black-veiled revolutionary women.¹⁸ As the text inscribed on the photographs was accessible to Farsi readers only, the

¹⁶ Neshat, 'The other Egyptian crisis', in *Reuters*, 5th March 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/03/05/the-other-egyptian-crisis/>. Accessed 16th April 2019.

¹⁷ On the Arab Spring in Egypt see Neil Ketchley, *Egypt in a time of revolution: contentious politics and the Arab Spring*, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 1-8.

¹⁸ See Melissa Ho, 'A State of In-between: Shirin Neshat's Iran', in Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, pp.12-15.

poetical meaning was detached from the political context of the images and the more layered, performative resonance of the works was either lost or misread.¹⁹ For example, the iconic traits of the veiled women were associated with patriarchal and religious oppression. Laurie Attias, in a review for *Artnews*, wrote that Neshat's photographs are "a potent metaphor for the harsh reality in which Muslim women are publicly censored and held captive in their traditional roles"²⁰, underlining the oppression of women caused by religious or social laws. On October 20th 1995, the art historian Pepe Karmel published a review in *The New York Times* in which he claimed her work demonstrated a nostalgia for Islamic fundamentalism: "Ms. Neshat's imagery seems tainted by a 1960s-style glorification of revolutionary violence: radical chic comes back, in her pictures, as radical sheik"²¹. And yet in December of the same year, the art critic Martha Schwender reviewed the same exhibition, hailing it as an attempt to break the boundaries of Iranian stereotypes.²² In response to these conflicting reviews Neshat said: "My portrayal of Islamic women engaged in violence, is not my attempt to promote a 'radical chic', but to speak about a particular feminism that is rooted in Islam. Throughout history Islamic women have fought alongside men in the line of duty, women have shared the responsibility and the cost of being a martyr"²³.

The critical reception of Neshat's *Women of Allah* is too long to be exhaustively analysed here. From 1995 to 2001 the calligraphy written on her images was mostly neglected. Critical reviews read her work either as documentary or autobiographical. In

¹⁹ There were no translations of the text available.

²⁰ Laurie Attias, 'Shirin Neshat: Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris', in *Artnews*, Vol. 97, 1998, p. 174.

²¹ Pepe Karmel, 'Art in Review: Shirin Neshat', in *The New York Times*, 20th October 1995.

²² Martha Schwender, 'Review', in *The New Art Examiner*, December 1995.

²³ Neshat, in conversation with Zaya, *Creative Camera*, October-November, 1996, pp. 18-24.

1997, on the occasion of Neshat's solo exhibition at Marco Noire Gallery, the historian Hamid Dabashi wrote about the use of the veil in Iran. According to Dabashi, Neshat renegotiates the conception of the Muslim woman presented under the pictorial code of suppression, which is the veil, that is counteracted by the returning of the gaze: "contesting the <<Islamic>> body while returning the colonial gaze"²⁴. The photographs were thus read as documentary-like images of the condition of women in Iran. However, Neshat underlines the non-documentary agenda of her work in an interview with Gerald Matt : "Investing my own flesh somehow seemed to guarantee a sense of intimacy that prevented the work from becoming a propaganda or documentary piece"²⁵.

When in 1998, Neshat's *Women of Allah* was shown in Paris, the importance of the texts was again overlooked. Farideh Cadot and Jean-Luc Monterosso wrote in the catalogue about Neshat's "dual vantage point"²⁶ and "cultural mix"²⁷ that would have allowed her "to look more objectively and with more neutrality at Iran and the Muslim region"²⁸. The performative character of her work was misread as documentary-like and objective. The Farsi writing was associated with mute ornament: Hèlèna Bastais, in the same catalogue, wrote of the ornamental body and the silence of Neshat's photographs.²⁹ My analysis of Neshat's work, on the contrary, focuses on the specific relation between text and image. All texts in translation can be found in the literary appendix (pp. 56-65), in which the disposition of the lines mirrors the inscribed

²⁴ Dabashi, in Dabashi and Diego Cortez, exh. cat., *Shirin Neshat: May 1997*, Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, 1997, p. 12.

²⁵ Neshat, in Gabriel Mackert, ed., *Shirin Neshat*, Wien and London, 2000, p. 17.

²⁶ Cadot and Monterosso, 'About Shirin Neshat', in Hèlèna Bastais and Jean-François Couvreur, exh. cat., *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah, photographs, films, vidéos*, Paris, 1998, p. 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bastais, *Ibid.*, p. 14.

photographs.

Identity was another misinterpreted feature in Neshat's *Women of Allah*. In 2000, Cary Butler wrote in *the Eastern Art Report* journal, that “Neshat’s photographs have become icons of Iranian female identity”³⁰, and particularly underlined how the readings of Neshat’s work often reinforced stereotypes due to the neglected importance of the texts inscribed. In addition, in 2001, the artist Shoja Azari published an essay in the catalogue of the Montreal exhibition in which interprets the *Women of Allah* images as “imbued with the exilic nostalgia of homecoming”³¹. The author especially emphasised the importance of totem objects with the power of defining membership within a community, such as the gun, the veil, and the tulip. This dissertation argues that performativity informs the construction of Neshat’s images, and the poems quoted on her photographs give a literary insight to her artistic practice, which diverge from both documentary and overtly-autobiographical readings.

The poetry inscribed in Farsi received attention in 2001, when the literary scholar Farzaneh Milani analysed the importance of Neshat’s “visual poetry”³². Milani argued that the Persian calligraphic script “gives voice to the body and body to the voice”³³ on the basis of the complex textual relation between the body and the veil of words. This reading is particularly important in my analysis as it recognised that the poems belong to a specific historical moment that should not be overlooked when reading the texts.

Dabashi, in 2002, analysed the element of performativity in Neshat’s work

³⁰ Carly Butler, ‘Ambivalence and Iranian Identity – The Work of Shirin Neshat’, *Eastern Art Report*, Issue 47, 1st January 2002, p. 41.

³¹ Shoja Azari, ‘An inside Look at Shirin Neshat’s Art’, in Paulette Gagnon, Azari and Atom Egoyan, exh. cat., *Shirin Neshat*, Montréal, 2001. p. 116.

³² Milani, ‘The Visual Poetry of Shirin Neshat’, in Milani, *Shirin Neshat*, Milano, 2001, pp. 6-13.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

arguing that the use of the veil and veiling entailed a performative dimension which catered specifically to the global public as the artist collapses the local culture into the parameters of the global one.³⁴ The concept of authenticity was raised in tandem with the increasingly marketability of Neshat's work.³⁵ The scholar Melissa Miles, in 2004, turned the question of identity into the one of authenticity. Miles argued that the texts presented without translations on the one hand suggest an authentic meaning to be uncovered, but on the other hand show the impossibility of the transferral of meaning across cultural contexts.³⁶ My analysis opposes Miles's argument and tries to facilitate this exchange through the means of research and knowledge. The aim here is not to 'unveil' the truthful meaning of the poems, but to point at their possible interpretations.

The publication of *The Book of Kings* and *Our House Is on Fire* drew increased attention to the political dimension of Neshat's art. The cultural critic Abdee Katalari in 2011 defined Neshat as a "radical political artist"³⁷ due to the increasing historicity of her work. New questions between art and history were addressed: Octavio Zaya in the catalogue of the exhibition *Written on the Body*, underlined that *The Book of Kings* from the outset does not seem to refer to contemporary Iran.³⁸ Also Negar Azimi, in the 2015 catalogue of the Mathaf exhibition, wrote that Neshat's images reference a specific history, while at the same time distancing themselves from the specific historical events.³⁹ These readings are important for my inquiry as they confirm that Neshat does

³⁴ Dabashi in Ida Giannelli, Dabashi, RoseLee Goldberg, Giorgio Verzotti, Neshat, exh. catalogue, *Shirin Neshat*, Milano, 2002, pp. 36-68.

³⁵ See Shiva Balaghi, 'Against the Market: The Art of Shirin Neshat', in *Ibraaz*, 25th September 2016, accessed 14th April 2019.

³⁶ Miles, 'Shirin Neshat and the limits of authenticity', in Cathy Greenfield, ed., *Southern Review: Communication, politics and Culture*, Adelaide, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2004, pp. 4-18.

³⁷ Kalatari, exh. cat., *Shirin Neshat: The Book of Kings*, Torino, 2011, p. 12.

³⁸ Zaya and Karimi, *Shirin Neshat: Escrito sobre el cuerpo/Written on the Body*, Madrid, 2013, p. 12.

³⁹ Azimi, 'Look at me', in Karroum and Beschi, *Ibid.*, pp. 21-24.

not reference history directly, but employs metaphors.

I am to consider the photographic series of *Women of Allah*, *The Book of Kings* and *Our House Is on Fire* in relation to Neshat's shifting approach to history, poetry and the image through performativity. Drawing on the work of Milani, who argues that Neshat's *Women of Allah* are giving voice to the body and a body to the voice, and Dabashi, who discusses the performativity of the veil; I will argue the centrality of symbols, gestures, and the calligraphic script as tools of performativity in Neshat's photographs. The texts are best read as theatrical scripts, that give voice to the revolutionaries.

Performativity is used here as Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson have analysed it: as the open-endedness of interpretation, which should be understood as a process without a fixed answer. In 1999, Jones stated that meaning cannot be anchored as negotiated through language: "meaning comes to be understood as a negotiated domain, in flux and contingent on social and personal investments and contexts".⁴⁰ Previously, Umberto Eco in *Opera Aperta* (1965) applied the conception of the open-endedness of interpretation to contemporary art, one that aims at the breaking with conventional productions of meaning: "the persistency of the existence of the work of art is guaranteed by the numerous possible readings of it, as much as the possibilities of its aesthetic fruition"⁴¹.

The first chapter analyses the *Women of Allah* series, exploring the performative

⁴⁰ Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, eds., *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, London and New York, 1999, p. 2.

⁴¹ Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*, Milano, 2016, "la persistenza dell'opera è garanzia delle possibilità comunicative e insieme delle possibilità di fruizione estetica", p. 184.

character of Neshat's photographic compositions as well as the performative role their ambiguity demands of the viewer. I will discuss the American perception of the 1979 Revolution, its subsequent production of stereotypes of Islamic fanaticism, and the use of the veil at the end of the 1970s. These photographs are related to the public representation of martyrs in the streets of Tehran after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988); scholars have neglected this relation to Tehran.

The second chapter focuses on the *Book of Kings* and the artist's referencing of the *Shahnameh* to metaphorically represent the contemporary political movement.⁴² In this series, the representation of Iran is conveyed by the performativity of the sitters' role play. The viewer is once again called 'on stage' and confronted with an open, unfolding history.

Finally, the third chapter analyses the shift that occurs in the representation of *Our House Is on Fire* as the viewer is effectively asked to be the final actor, left with the task of performing meaning. The grief of the identities depicted is emphasised to the extent that the ideals of the political revolutions are no longer the subject of the representation.

⁴² The *Shahnameh* is the national epic poem of Iran, written in verses by the poet Ferdowsi, in Farsi (c.977-1010 CE).

Chapter 1

Women of Allah

Women of Allah depicts Neshat and other women performing as militant revolutionaries in Iran in 1979.⁴³ The boldness of these images caught the attention of the press. Even in the pre-9/11 era the political and cultural representation of Iran, especially from the American perspective, centred on images that circulated since the revolution and during the hostage crisis (4th November 1979 to 20th January 1981).⁴⁴ The pro and anti Shah demonstrations were discerned by the women's way of dressing. Western attire was worn in pro-Shah demonstrations, who promoted Western progressivism, whereas the black chador was mostly worn, in a political as well as religious way, by the women supporting the revolution. In the unfolding of the political tension between Iran and America, the latter associated the chador with Islamic fundamentalism and/or patriarchal imposition on women's liberty.⁴⁵

This chapter analyses the symbolism of the veil, the tulip and the hand in Neshat's photographs in relation to the poetic text inscribed and the concept of martyrdom promulgated by the Islamic Republic during the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war; to argue that the artist offers a tribute to the female revolutionaries

⁴³ Neshat in the acknowledgments of the Annina Noisei Gallery catalogue, in 1997, gives thanks to her friends who have kindly posed for her photographs: Arita, Kian, Azin, Yasira, Mehdi, Elaheh, Fariba, and her son, Cyrus.

⁴⁴ The photographer Abbas shot images of the Revolution, reproduced by *Times*, *Paris-Match*, *El Pais* and *Stern*. They have been exhibited in France, England, Spain, Iran, Mexico, America. Shiva Balaghi, 'Writing with Light: Abbas's photographs of the Iranian Revolution of 1979', in Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, eds., *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, London, 2002, p. 106.

The hostage crisis happened during the collapse of the Shah's government, when the revolutionaries attacked and kept in hostage the American Embassy in Tehran.

⁴⁵ See Sylvia Chan-Malik, 'Chador, Feminists, Terror: The Racial Politics of U.S. Media Representations of the 1979 Iranian Women's Movement', in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 637, Race, Religion and Late Democracy, September 2011, pp. 112-140.

through her performative photography and a metaphorical use of objects.

The symbolism of the veil in Iranian history is complex. In the early 1920s, several leading women activists stopped wearing the veil in public.⁴⁶ On 1st February 1936, Reza Shah Pahlavi abolished the veil in Iran and women could only wear European style hats or go hatless, even scarfs were banned; any woman who did not follow the law risked having her veil pulled off by the police.⁴⁷ The forcible banning of the veil encountered strong resentment among many women who believed it to be a sign of propriety and modesty; the law was abandoned after 1941.⁴⁸ Throughout the Revolution, the veil became a political, rather than a moral, signifier of the opposition to the Shah's regime and its *gharbzadegi*, literally *west-toxication*.⁴⁹

Neshat resists the mainstream narrative of the fundamentalism of the veil through the inscription of Persian secular poetry by women writers. Farrokhzad's and Tehreh Saffarzadeh's poems are extensively quoted in both *Unveiling* and *Women of Allah* series.⁵⁰ The two poets seem to have a polarised view of women's freedom in their poetic production. On the one hand, Farrokhzad is recognised as a progressive liberal woman and a defender of women's freedom of expression.⁵¹ On the other hand, Saffarzadeh's last collection of poems, *Biy'at ba Bidari (Allegiance with Wakefulness, 1980)*, erases the self-conscious femininity of the poet and replaces it with Shi'i

⁴⁶ Mrs. Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi and Shams ul-Muluk Javahirkalam, on the condition of women in pre-revolutionary Iran see Guy Nashat, ed., *Women and Revolution in Iran*, Boulder, 1983, p. 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26-28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Fereshteh Daftari, 'Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective', in Balaghi and Gumpert, *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Saffarzadeh (1936-2008) is an Iranian poet whose turn towards Islam was deeply felt personally, see Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, New York, 1992, pp. 153-174.

⁵¹ See Milani, 'Revitalization', in Guy Nashat, ed., *Women and Revolution in Iran*, Boulder, 1983, p. 137.

consciousness and a one-dimensional proselytising for the Islamic revolution.⁵² Neshat quotes these poems in ink directly on the photographs. Most of the sitters perform as part of the revolutionary movement but did not physically take part in the 1979 Revolution. The texts and the image construction transforms these women in the militant revolutionaries of 1979.

The art works analysed here are in chronological order and present Neshat's manifold photographic frames: the faces, the hands, the feet and the whole figure. The images are from both the earlier series *Unveiling* and *Women of Allah* and their analysis centres on the powerful enactment of the texts by the image. The poems inscribed suggest a resurrection of the women's bodies: the photographs are a tribute to the women that lost their lives in the revolution and are not remembered in the same way as male revolutionaries, whose sacrifice take concrete, commemorative shape in the remembrance walls scattered around Tehran (fig. 7).⁵³ While in the *Unveiling* series the poems evoke reclusion, distance, rebellion and death, in *Women of Allah*, the words centre on the concept of martyrdom, *shahadat*, and the promise of a future rebirth of the body and soul. In this way, Neshat corrects the narrative of the regime by creating a space for women revolutionaries to be remembered and her images purposely recall the martyrs' murals in Tehran. Critics have overlooked this opposing of the regime's symbolism.

The photograph titled *Offered Eyes* (fig. 2) underlines the uniqueness of Neshat's artistic practice in the ideological and physical construction of the image. The eye is her

⁵² Milani (1983), *Ibid.*, pp. 130-139.

⁵³ Dabashi, 'The Local Look', in Giannelli, Dabashi, Goldberg, Verzotti, Neshat *Ibid.*, p. 51.



Fig. 2: Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes*, in *Unveiling* series, 1993. Ink on black and white gelatin silver print, 133 x 92.1 cm. Photo taken by Plauto. Copyright of Shirin Neshat, Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

own, and around the iris the letters expand in the shape of concentric circles. The artist inscribes on her own self Farrokhzad's poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden', in which no one sees that the garden is dying (see literary appendix p. 56, vv. 1-5). Neshat presents herself as caring for the garden, which is a metaphor of Iran, by writing the words inside

her eye, underlining that she is looking out.⁵⁴ The eye also refers to the eye of the camera which presents the spectator these photographs not as documentary, as the viewer is led to believe through the use of the photographic medium, but as performing Neshat's own narrative.⁵⁵

In *Untitled* (fig. 3) Neshat references a symbol of Karbala and addresses the concept of the resurrection of the body.⁵⁶ In the photograph a woman is silencing her lips, as much as kissing her hand. Farrokhzad's secular poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' is written on her fingers, while a Shi'i invocation is written in the middle of the circle; the invocation reads *Ya Qamar Bani Hashim*.⁵⁷ The poem written in the circular shape is Saffarzadeh's 'Allegiance with Wakefulness' (see literary appendix pp. 57-58).

The image and the poetry are closely related. The hand is referencing the hamsa and symbolises martyrdom.⁵⁸ It has a direct relation to the severed hand of Abbas, who was martyred by having his hands cut off in the Battle of Karbala (680 CE) as he was fetching water for the soldiers of Imam Hossein. While Abbas wanted to bring life through water, in Farrokhzad's poetic text no one is caring about the life of the garden/Iran, no one brings water to the garden (vv. 5-7).

⁵⁴ Neshat in an interview with Jeffrey Brown underlines that for her the garden is a metaphor for a woman. See <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/shirin-neshat-translates-iranian-political-unrest-artistic-lens>. Accessed 16th April 2019.

⁵⁵ On the photographic medium see Walter Benjamin, *A short history of photography*, Berlin, 1931, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁶ The battle of Karbala (680 AD) has a central place in Shi'i history. It was fought between the Umayyad caliph Yazid I and Imam Hossein, grandson of the Prophet, who was martyred during the battle along with his family and followers. He became a symbol of sacrifice. See Pedram Khosronejad, *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism*, London and New York, 2012, pp. 94-101.

⁵⁷ The *Ya* is the *Oh* of the invocation. *Qamar Bani Hashim* is another name used to refer to Al-Abbas ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁸ The hamsa is a five-fingered shape associated with the hand of Abbas, in the Shi'i context. See Chan-Malik on the use of the hamsa, 'Dialogues between 'Orientalism' and Modernism in Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah*', in Celina Jeffery and Gregory Minissale, eds., *Global and Local Art Histories*, Newcastle, 2007, p. 162.

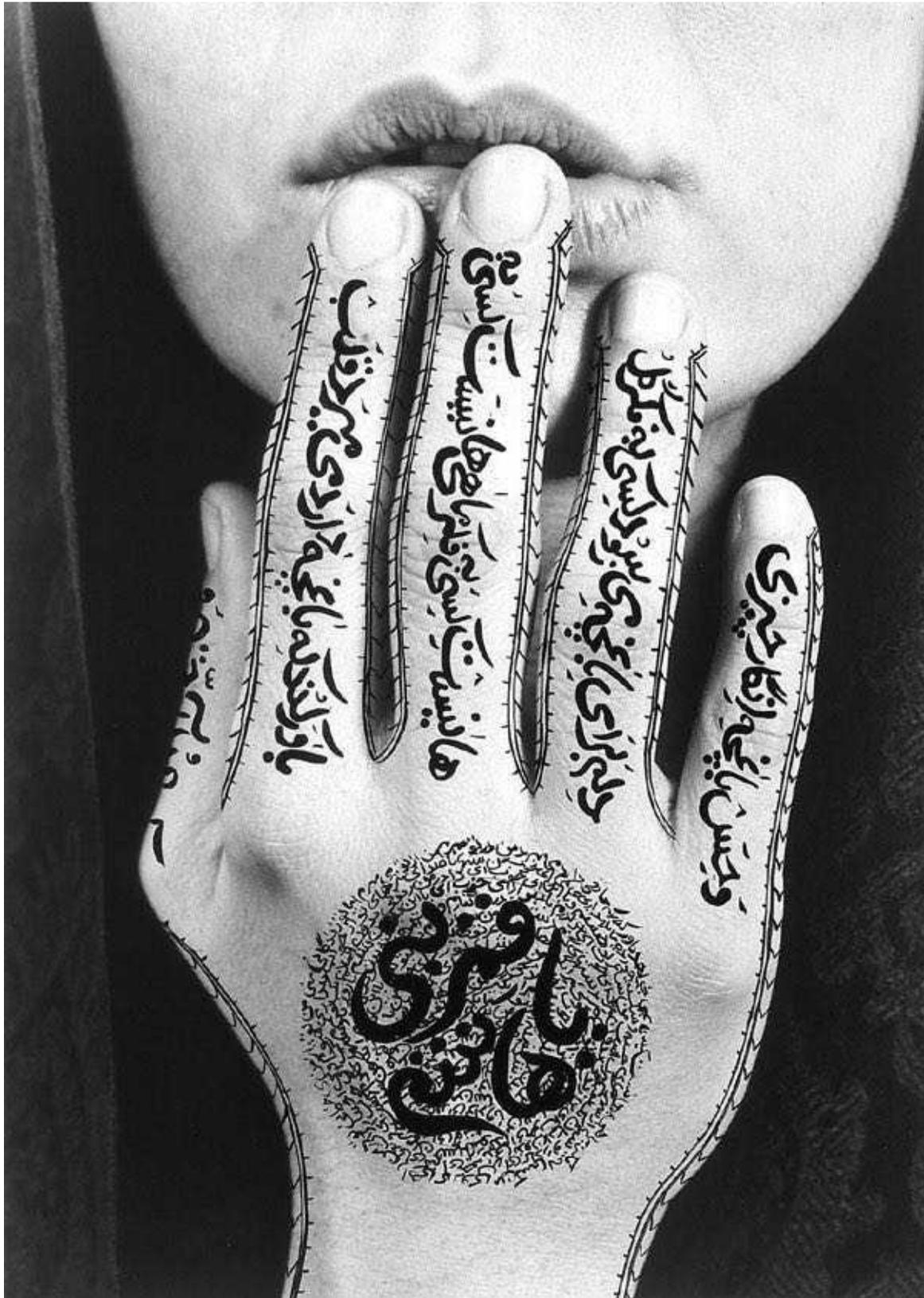


Fig. 3: Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, from *Women of Allah* series, 1996. Ink on black and white RC print, 121.6 x 85.7cm. Photo taken by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Saffarzadeh's poem shows an allegiance to the martyrs of Karbala and of contemporary Iran, and bridges the historical gap between the text and the event. The lips kissing the hand recalls the ritual kissing of the hamsa, which then is an invocation for Abbas to come and give life back to the garden/Iran. At the same time, Saffarzadeh's poem is allied with the revolutionaries, whom the woman in the photograph is embodying.

Saffarzadeh's poem 'Allegiance with Wakefulness' is also inscribed on both *Rebellious Silence* (fig. 4) and *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (fig. 5) (see pp. 58-60). These two photographs exemplify the ultimate target of Neshat's critique: the Islamic Republic's eschewing of the representation of female martyrs on the walls of Tehran, as after the revolution women were mostly confined to the domestic spaces.

In both images the rifle recalls the violent act of martyrdom, and divides the body of the women in two parts: in *Rebellious Silence* it casts a shadow on the right half of her face, and in *Allegiance with Wakefulness* it divides the two feet. However, the rifle also frames the symmetry and brings order to the image. Once again, the text and the photograph are closely related as the women embody the lonely guard watching for the enemy (see p. 58, vv. 25). The performance is brought about by Neshat herself, who poses in *Rebellious Silence*. This photograph is not a portrait as the symbols of the veil, the rifle and the poem are not related to Neshat's experience, rather her performance can be interpreted as a tribute to those women who lost their lives for the revolution.



Fig. 4: Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, from *Women of Allah* series, 1994. Ink on RC print, 118.4 x 79.1cm. Photo taken by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

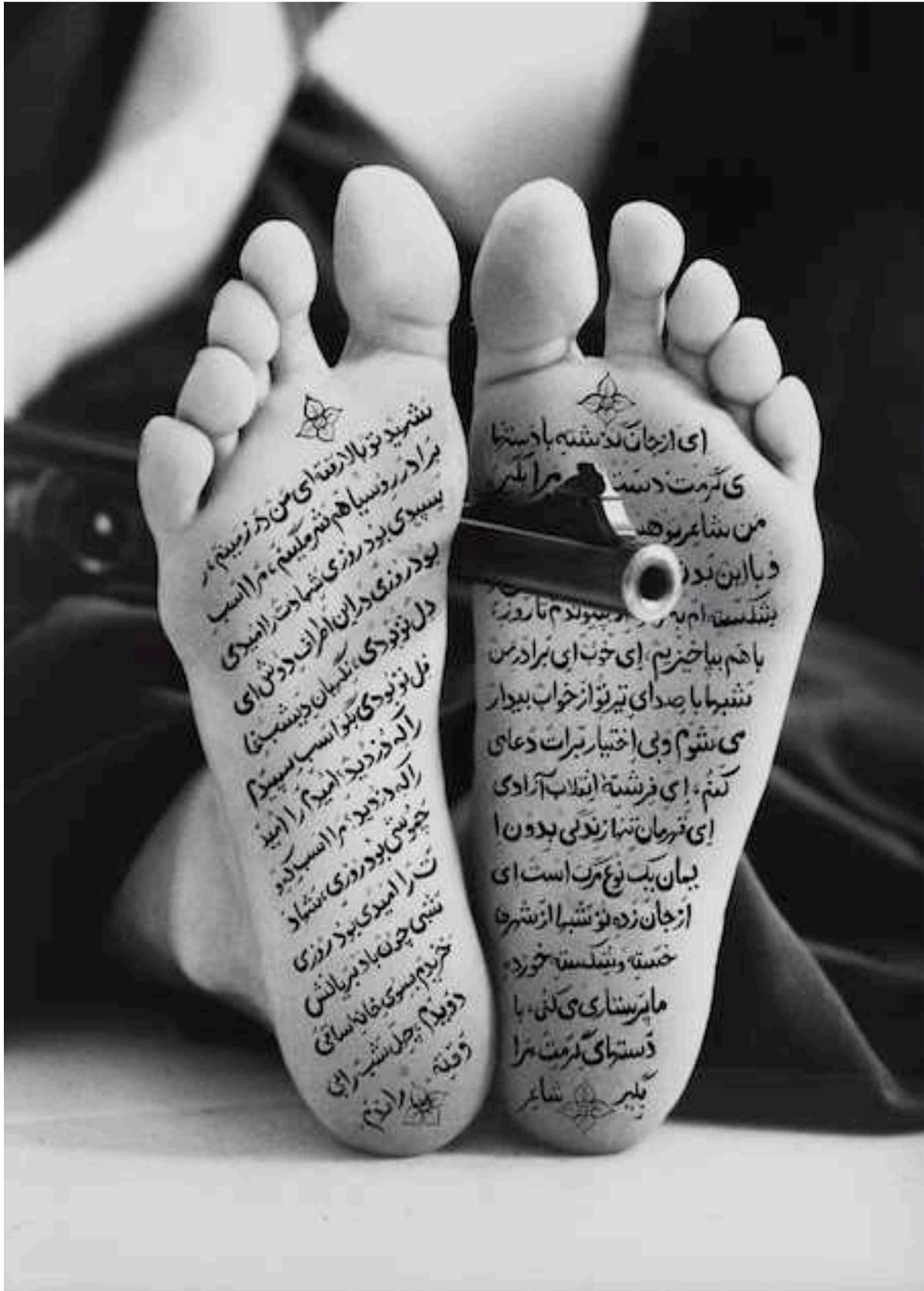


Fig. 5: Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, from *Women of Allah* series, 1994. Ink on RC print, 118.7 x 94.6cm. Photo by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

The concept of martyrdom was emphasised during the Iran-Iraq war.⁵⁹ Murals of martyrs were painted on the public walls of Tehran during the revolution and after the war, yet only one woman features on Tehran’s walls: Fuzieh Shirdel (fig. 6). Shirdel was martyred in Paveh, Kurdistan, in August 1980, while acting as a nurse.⁶⁰ Neshat and the other women depicted in *Women of Allah* are recognised as militant martyrs of the revolution because they reiterate the regime’s symbols of martyrdom as represented on murals and posters.



Fig. 6: Visual display in Tehran, photographed in 2014 by Bill Rolston. On the left Fouzieh Shirdel. The text reads: “We are going to start this new year remembering these martyrs [from right to left]: martyr (female form) Fuzieh Shirdel; martyr Malcom Latyif Shabaz; martyr Mulavi Mustafa Jang Zehi.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Peter Chelkowski, ‘The Art of the Revolution’, in Balaghi and Gumpert, *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁰ On the martyrs walls of Tehran see Bill Rolston, ‘When everywhere is Karbala: Murals, martyrdom and propaganda in Iran’, online article, published 13th September 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017730870>. Accessed 28th December 2018.

⁶¹ The image is one of the many documentary photographs in Rolston, *Ibid.* For more images see <https://billrolston.weebly.com/iran.html>. Translation by Heliya Haq.



Fig. 7: The martyr Seyyed Mujitaba Hashemi, a commander during the irregular wars in Kurdistan in 1985. Photo credits to Damiana Foscari. The text reads “Our God, we send greetings to the Prophet and his family”.⁶²



Fig. 8: Poster of martyred member of the Mojahedin, c. 1980-1988, 36 x 25 cm. The text reads: “God prefers those who thrive to those who desist” and “Mujahedin martyr, Muhammad Barzakane”.



Fig. 9: Morteza Momayez, poster depicting fists as tulips, c. 1978-1979, 48 x 33cm.

⁶² Translation by Rolston, *Ibid.*

Neshat's images of war violence are similar to the man carrying a rifle (fig. 7) and Shirdel (fig. 6). The absence of blood-shed is part of the traditional representation of martyrs of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Moreover, the man's identification with a martyr is highlighted by the image of Imam Hossein on a horse, on the right-hand corner of the mural (fig. 7). At times, only the face is represented as in the poster commemorating a Mojahedin martyr during the anti-Shah struggle (fig. 8). Similarly, to Neshat's images, these martyrs are remembered through their portraits, rather than through the specific data regarding their death or deeds.

Neshat's images recall martyrdom through specific symbols.⁶³ The most important is the tulip, which during the revolution acquired a new meaning. Derived from the Persian Sufi association with the blood of lovers shed in the quest of the beloved, it later came to symbolise the bloodshed from the lovers of the revolution.⁶⁴ Morteza Momayez's poster clearly conveys this new meaning: three red tulips clenched in the shape of fists are topped by the script "Tulips have blossomed from the blood of the nation's youth" (fig. 9).⁶⁵ Neshat's photograph *Untitled* (fig. 10) refers to this concept, and presents the tulip blooming from her body in the same place of the rifle in *Rebellious Silence* (fig. 4). Neshat is looking steadily at the viewer with gravity and holds the tulip: symbol of martyrdom, redemption and resurrection.

Neshat inverts the narrative of the regime through the depiction of women martyrs. The artist said: "I was mainly concerned with socio-political issues initially, I found photography the most appropriate medium because it offered the sense of

⁶³ Neshat never inscribes the Qur'an.

⁶⁴ Ram, 'Multiple Iconographies', in Balaghi and Gumpert, *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶⁵ Translated in Balaghi, 'The century of machinery', in Balaghi and Gumpert, *Ibid.*, p. 33.

‘realism’ I needed”.⁶⁶ The importance of these women in both the intellectual and the metaphysical worlds is expressed through Farrokhzad's and Saffarzadeh's poems and by recalling the rebirth of the martyrs' bodies after death. The artist questions the traditions of the established regime of the Islamic Republic to give voice to historically-erased movements and identities.



Fig. 10: Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, from *Women of Allah* series, 1995. C-print, 118.4 x 84.6 cm. Courtesy of Repetto Gallery, London.

⁶⁶ Neshat, quoted in Mackert, *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Chapter 2

The Book of Kings

The Book of Kings is Neshat's second major independent photographic work. After *Women of Allah* Neshat's return to photography was informed by her previous artistic media experimentations. The representation of a revolutionary movement occurs in both series, but the staging of performativity through gestures rather than the symbolic significance of objects, demonstrate Neshat's new perspective of the revolution in the later series. Portraiture still depicts the historical event, but unlike *Women of Allah*, *The Book of Kings* portrays not only the activists of the movement, but also the *Villains* and the *Masses*, thereby depicting a broader view of the population, not just one gender or power position. This shows her intention of representing the country, rather than a movement. Moreover, the text on *The Book of Kings* photographs is staged differently according to the sitters' role in the series. The text written on the faces of the *Patriots* is bold and legible to underline the *Patriots*' activism, while the *Masses*, as simple witnesses of the events, only passively display it. The relation between image and text is even further emphasised on the bodies of the *Villains*: through these war lithographs Neshat aims at showing the clash between words and power.

This chapter argues that performativity is staged in both the gestures of the sitters and the arrangement of the photographs in this later series, which is once again a tribute to a political and social movement.

The title of the series, *The Book of Kings*, is the direct translation of *Shahnameh* (*shah* is kings, *nameh* is letter), and underlines the significance of this epic poem in today's world. The *Shahnameh* (c. 977-1010 AD), the Persian epic written by Ferdowsi,

was one of the tools that helped Farsi survive as a language after the Arab conquest of Persia (7th century AD), and there are similarities between the legend of Ferdowsi, his epic book and the Green Movement itself. The legend tells that Sultan Mahmud promised to pay Ferdowsi a gold coin for every commissioned line of the poem, however, the sultan did not fulfil his promise. The ruler, finally realising his mistake, travelled to the poet's city, Tus, but was too late as Ferdowsi was already dead. The story shows that in the struggle between the poet and the king, the latter might have won in earthly power, but Ferdowsi gained lasting admiration and fame.⁶⁷ Neshat intertwines the legend, the *Shahnameh* and the Green Movement to demonstrate that interior greatness overcomes death.

The Book of Kings depicts the people that took part in or against the Green Movement. The display of the series in 2013 at the Faurschou Foundation, Beijing, conveys to the viewers a perception of the political fronts. One wall was devoted to the *Villains* (three photographs) hang together, the opposite wall to the *Masses* (forty-five photographs) ordered in three rows. The remaining two walls were for the *Patriots* (ten photographs) hang in one row, split into two groups of five. The viewer in the space understands immediately the role play and is conscious of his own position as standing in the battle ground between these groups.

The *Villains* are in the position of power, which is conveyed by their poses, upfront, standing or sitting, but also by the violence that is depicted on their flesh as constitutive of their own self; *Sharif* (fig. 11) and *Amir* (fig. 12) wear blood.

⁶⁷ Ferdowsi, and Dick Davis ed., *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, New York, 2006. <https://ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1126480&site=ehost-live&scope=site> Accessed 27th January 2019.

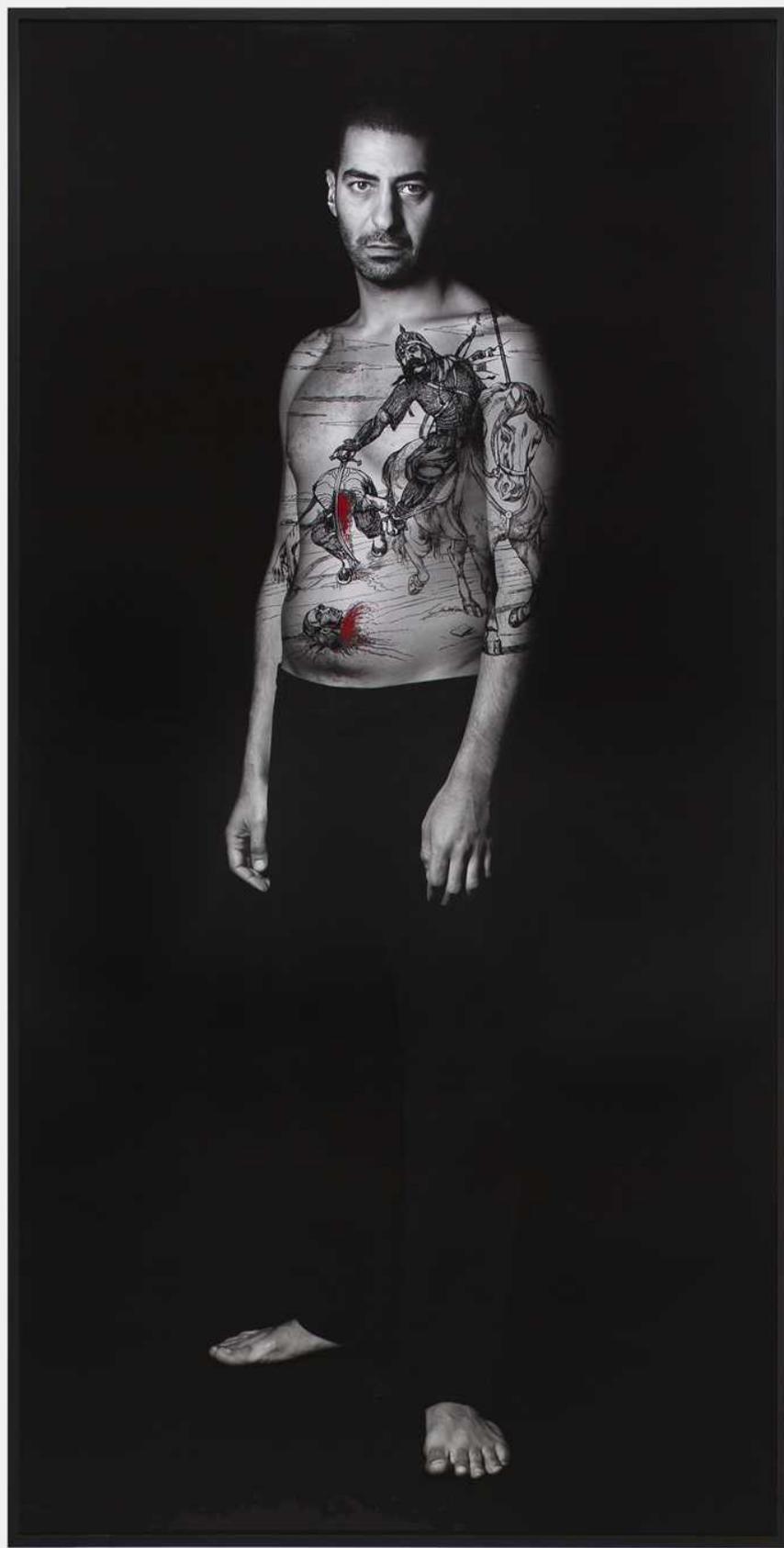


Fig. 11: Shirin Neshat, *Sharif (Villains)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on gelatin silver print, 251.5 x 125.7 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

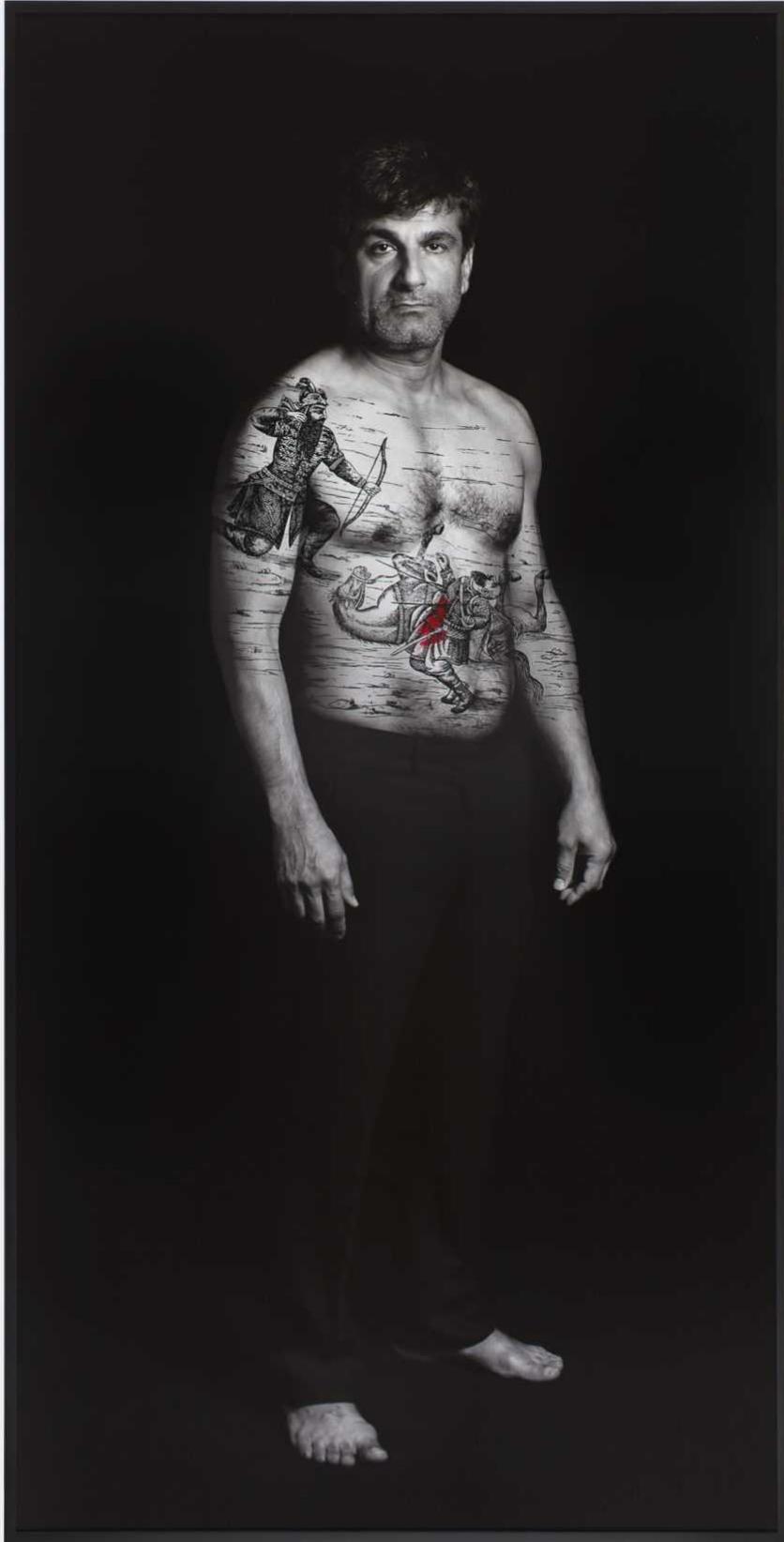


Fig. 12: Shirin Neshat, *Amir (Villains)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on gelatin silver print, 251.5 x 125.7 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

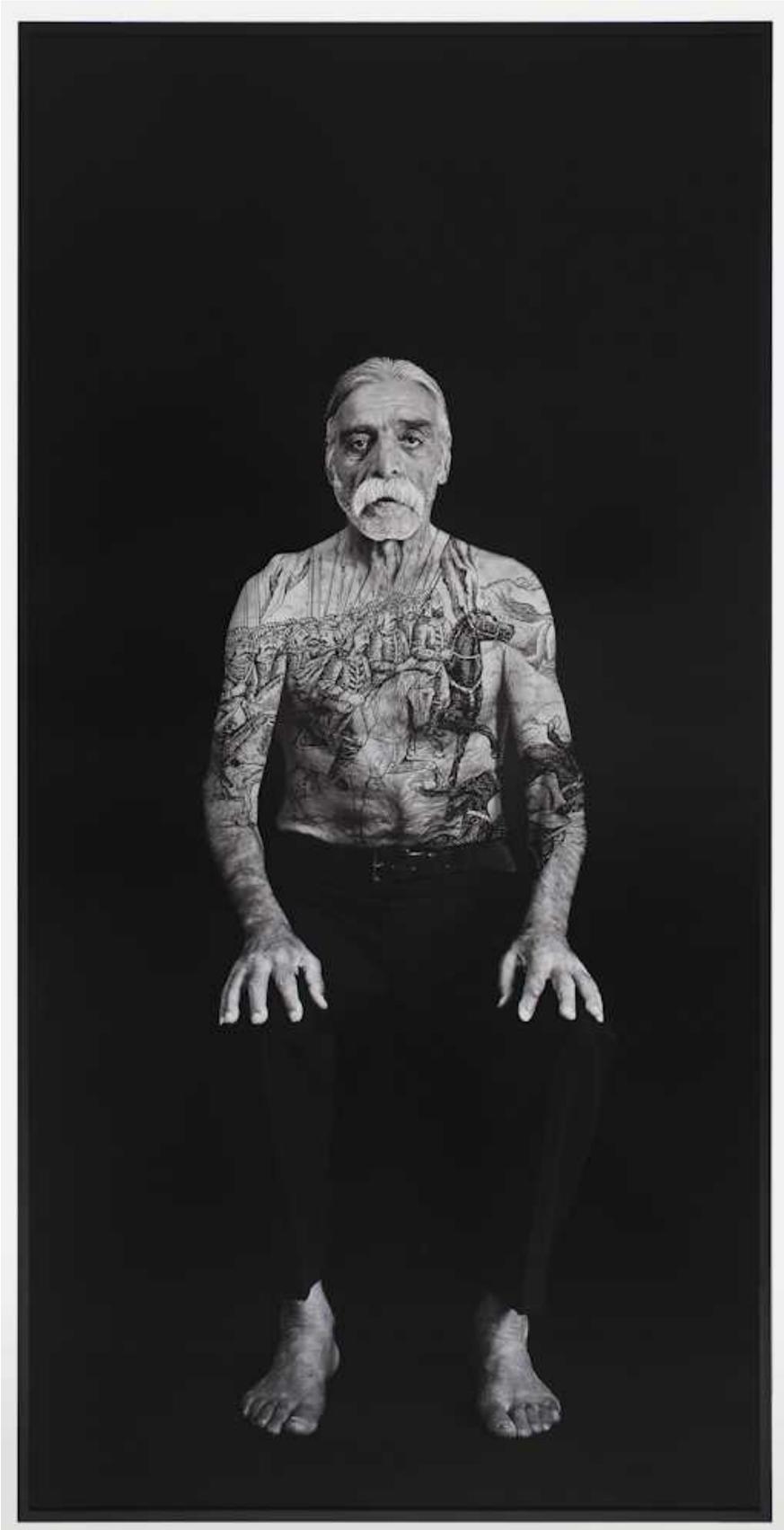


Fig. 13: Shirin Neshat, *Bahram (Villains)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on gelatin silver print, 251.5 x 125.7 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Contrary to these portraits, the *Patriots* and the *Masses* proclaim the power of words rather than that of physical violence. On *Sharif* it is represented the hero Giv departing for Turan, he married the daughter of Rostam and was the brother of Bahram.⁶⁸ Rostam is recognisable on *Amir*'s torso from his white demon head covering, he is the greatest hero of the *Shahnameh*. *Bahram* (fig. 13) instead, presents armies marching with battle gear. He is an Iranian hero of the *Shahnameh* and in the legend of Seyavash his new position at the command of the Iranian army will be the cause of his death. The representation of this moment in *Bahram* suggests the complexity of the relationship between heroes and power, a recurring theme in the *Shahnameh*. The names given to the *Villains* are not related to Iran's contemporary politics, but the representation of the *Shahnameh*'s heroes on the *Villains* blurs the distinction between contemporary politicians and the epic heroes they bear on their skin. This juxtaposition refutes the portrayal of their identities as wholly wicked: that these villains might become heroes remains possible.

Unlike the *Villains*, the *Patriots* are gender-balanced, and in their ranks Neshat represents the fortitude of women rebels, as much as that of men. The *Patriots* are photographed from the middle bust and are presented in close proximity to the viewer, their bodies are inscribed with contemporary poetry and writings. They pose with an arm raised to recall the beating of the chest with the hand over the heart that occurs every year in the processions for Ashura.⁶⁹ Moreover, the pose struck in Neshat's images was taken up from a photograph titled *Bereaveds* (fig. 14).

⁶⁸ Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Ashura is the commemoration of the martyrs of Karbala, composed of mourning and penitent processions.



Fig. 14: Unknown artist, *Bereaveds*, Nasereddin Shah era (1831-1896), Courtesy of Shirin Neshat and Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Similarly, the *Patriots* are depicted united but mourning, as though foreseeing the outcome of the Green Movement.

On the faces of the *Patriots* the text is arranged in three columns, as in the *Shahnameh*, and the white spacing between them runs across the two eyes of the sitters, marking a visual and a literal connection between their eyes and heart. The eyes and the mouth are left without words so that their piercing force can be conveyed in all its power.

The poems inscribed on *Nida* (fig. 15) and *Muhammad* (fig. 16) are Saffarzadeh's poem 'Allegiance with Wakefulness' and Farrokhzad's 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' (see literary appendix pp. 60-61). The repetition of these poems underlines Neshat's intention to recall the martyrs of her previous series, *Women of Allah*, as to highlight



Fig. 15: Shirin Neshat, *Nida (Patriots)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on LE gelatin silver print, 152.4 x 114.3 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Fig. 16: Shirin Neshat, *Muhammad (Patriots)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink of LE gelatin silver print, 152.4 x 114.3 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

once more the cost of the revolution in terms of lives. The two poems are assembled on *Nida's* and *Muhammad's* faces: on the one hand they highlight the urgency of their action, as 'the garden is dying' (vv. 12,14), on the other hand they invoke their brothers of the revolution (v. 5). Their personality shows through the thick writing: *Nida* fixes the viewer with an attentive gaze (fig. 15), while *Muhammad*, seems to present himself more like a martyr than a hero (fig. 16).

Neshat inscribed the power of words on the bodies of the *Patriots* as a reference to the non-violent values of the Green Movement. The Farsi script, a pivotal element of continuity between the rebels of *Women of Allah* and of *The Book of Kings*, is staged in a different way on the *Patriots*. Only the bodies of the *Villains* bear no words, but projections of lithographs of the *Shahnameh*.

The presence of the *Masses* is a shifting point in Neshat's narrative as the central stage is made up by the *Villains* and the *Patriots* but the population also partakes in the representation of Iran. Neshat developed an engaging way of addressing the viewer, informed from her video works. In a similar vein, the artist keeps track of the onlookers to the political events of the Green Movement in Iran, as they are the embodiment of the Iranian people and the country at large.

The role of the *Masses* is not strictly active, they are represented closer to the viewer, photographed head and shoulders and printed in a smaller format. The character of the writing on their bodies is minute and nearly illegible, both inviting and resisting contact. They represent all genders and age, apart from children. Contrary to the *Patriots*, they do not share a performative character in their gestures, but rather in their



Fig. 17: Shirin Neshat, *Mana (Masses)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on gelatin silver print, 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

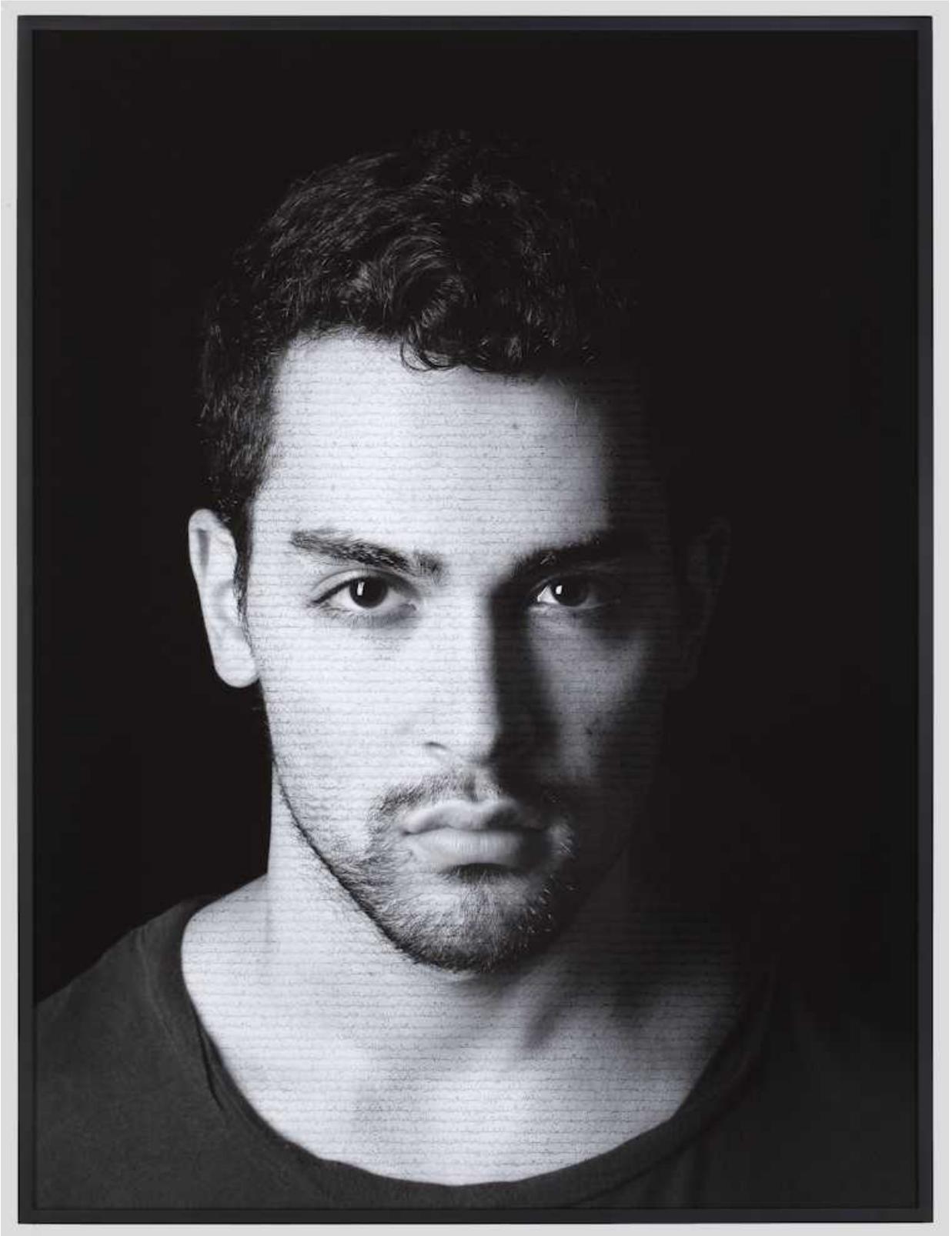


Fig. 18: Shirin Neshat, *Salah (Masses)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Ink on gelatin silver print, 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

photographic framing which facilitates intimacy.

The poetic text repeats multiple times on the faces of the *Masses*. *Mana* (fig. 17) bears the words by Simin Behbahani's poem 'Saga of Pain', while *Salah* (fig. 18) Ahmad Shamlou's 'Of Death' (see literary appendix pp. 62-63).⁷⁰ *Mana* represents anxiety, she seems to be questioning both herself and the viewer and thus embody Behbahani's text 'Is this me? Is it? Who am I, and what is sorrow?' (v. 17). *Salah* also relates to Shamlou's words by showing determination: 'I have never feared death' (v. 1).

The *Masses* would hardly serve a performative role on their own, contrary to the *Villains*, who embody and perform power, and the *Patriots*, who represent the power of words. The *Masses* are staged in the narrative as witnesses of the events and thus in direct relation to the viewer.

⁷⁰ Behbahani (1927-2014) is known for the integration of tradition and modernity in her poetry. See Milani, 'Simin Behbahani: Iran's National Poet', in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1, February 2008, pp. 3-17.

Shamlou (1925-2000) is an influential poet for his experimentalism in the expansion of the poems' metrics. See Ehsan Yarshater, ed., transl. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *An Anthology of Modern Persian Poetry*, Boulder (Colorado), 1978, pp. 53-67.

Chapter 3

Our House Is on Fire

In 2013 the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation commissioned a new photographic series from Neshat, as part of the One-to-One artist's initiative, supporting art works in response to social issues.⁷¹ The foundation donated two limited edition prints from the series to thirty-three colleges and universities in order to promote dialogue. Christy MacLear, the executive director, said: "Our goal with this donation is to encourage dialogue about the portraits' artistic, cultural, and political value while also creating an opportunity for academic departments to collaborate with school museums and galleries"⁷². Neshat decided to base her work in Egypt, which was at the time the setting of her ongoing film project: *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Neshat has a different attitude towards revolution and agency. For the first time, in *Our House Is on Fire* (2013) the ideology of the state is left behind. The grief of the individual gains prominence over the ideological background, as all the sitters are not performers but locals that Neshat interviewed in Cairo. The final shift of Neshat's representation of revolutions centres on the survivors, rather than the ideals of the political renovation. Although using the same photographic language, the representation of a revolution becomes the portrayal of human loss. The poetry and words inscribed, which by 2013 became a sort of signature of Neshat's work, are barely visible on their faces. In fact, the expressions of these people challenge every social,

⁷¹Heather Russell, 'Shirin Neshat Discusses Her Series *Our House Is on Fire*', in Artnet News, 26th February, 2014. Accessed 14th April 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/shirin-neshat-discusses-her-series-our-house-is-on-fire-3314>. Neshat was the first artist of the project.

⁷² Robert Rauschenberg Foundation website. Accessed 14th April 2019. <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/newsfeed/foundation-donates-limited-edition-shirin-neshat-prints-universities-around-world-encourage>.

historical, political, ethnic and language barrier. The text for the most part is not legible. These photographs show the human suffering and grief that political upheavals and violence may bring into the life of people. For the first time the viewer is not confronted with multiple layers of meaning, but has the sensation of suddenly jumping into the human sorrow of these people.

This chapter analyses how Neshat represented the aftermath of the Arab Spring in relation to her previous series, to argue that performativity is now left in the hands of the viewer, who is asked to perform meaning.

The project started on a tragic note. When Neshat was about to travel with her collaborator, Larry Barns, his twenty-two-year-old daughter, Teal, suddenly died of an unexplained heart attack.⁷³ The production of these photographs is therefore burdened with their photographer's own personal loss as much as with that of the people depicted, the identities on both sides of the camera are closer than could be imagined. This mournful series is called *Our House Is on Fire* after the poem by Mehdi Akhavan Sales 'A Cry' (see literary appendix p. 64), in which he writes:⁷⁴

As this cruel fire
burns my foundation
I shout, scream, cry!⁷⁵

The foundation is here intended as the house material structure but also the author's

⁷³ Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, p. 27.

On Teal see Suzanne Falter, 'Teal Barns 1989-2012', accessed 14th April 2019. <http://suzannefalter.com/blog/teals-dads-thoughts-upon-her-death/>; <http://suzannefalter.com/about-teal/>.

⁷⁴ Akhavan Sales (1929-1990) was a very influential poet of modern Persian poetry and culture, see Marie Hubert, *Memories of an Impossible Future*, Leiden and Boston, 2017, pp. 1-12.

⁷⁵ Translated in Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, p. 233.

own spiritual ground. The poem ends with a panic-stricken calling for help, from shouting, to screaming, to the final cry. The sitters in *Our House Is on Fire* cry and express their resignation in the face of such a calamity.

The whole series bears reference to *The Book of Kings*, especially in its image framing which is similar to the representation of the *Masses*. It is in its difference, however, that *Our House Is on Fire* bears the power of its message: youth is no longer depicted, only the old men and women remain in the aftermath of the upheavals. Contrary to *The Book of Kings*, Neshat does not represent a country, but the death of an ideal, successful or unsuccessful as it may be, symbolised in the death of the youths. Only the witnesses to the events, the masses, survive the political tensions and revolutions, and bear in their eyes the atrocities and suffering they have seen and experienced.

The aged faces bear a strong contrast to the young generation represented in *The Book of Kings* and their solitude and sense of human loss is further emphasised by the passing of time visible on their skin. *Ghada* (fig. 19) must not be very old, but the signs on her face are the result of the mournful sleepless nights. On the contrary, on *Mona's* face (fig. 20) the old age is juxtaposed with the harsh experience of grief and loss: her gaze nevertheless looks firm and conscious of life. The marks of hunger are also present on some of the sitters, such as *Jamal* (fig. 21), who appears emaciated.

Another mark on their body is made through the illegible calligraphy (fig. 22). The writing is illegible due to the solarisation of the image. While in the previous series the calligraphy was applied at a later stage, this time the calligraphic script was projected directly onto the photographs, shrunk, and re-photographed with the original

solarisation. This process caused part of the script to be solarised as well, and therefore it appears extremely discoloured. The words are not applied on these bodies anymore, but sink into the skin of these old men and women as though another sign of the passing of time.

The photographs of the soles of the feet also directly recall the *Women of Allah* series. As a dreadful reminder of death the feet of the dead rise from the dark background with a little white label attached to the big toe, as in morgues. The tag is an imaginary description of the dead, by Neshat. The artist took an iconic photograph of feet in the previous *Women of Allah* series: *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (fig. 5). As much as *Allegiance With Wakefulness* bears an uncanny resemblance to the Twin Towers, *Hassan* also represents as an individual tragedy (fig. 23).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ *Allegiance with Wakefulness* was infamously chosen as the cover of *Artnews* in September 2001, nine days before the tragedy.



Fig. 19: Shirin Neshat, *Ghada*, from *Our House Is on Fire* series, 2013. Ink on digital chromogenic print, 157.8 x 102.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Fig. 20: Shirin Neshat, *Mona*, from *Our House Is on Fire* series, 2013. Ink on digital chromogenic print, 157.8 x 102.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Fig. 21: Shirin Neshat, *Jamal*, from *Our House Is on Fire* series, 2013. Ink on digital chromogenic print, 157.8 x 102.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

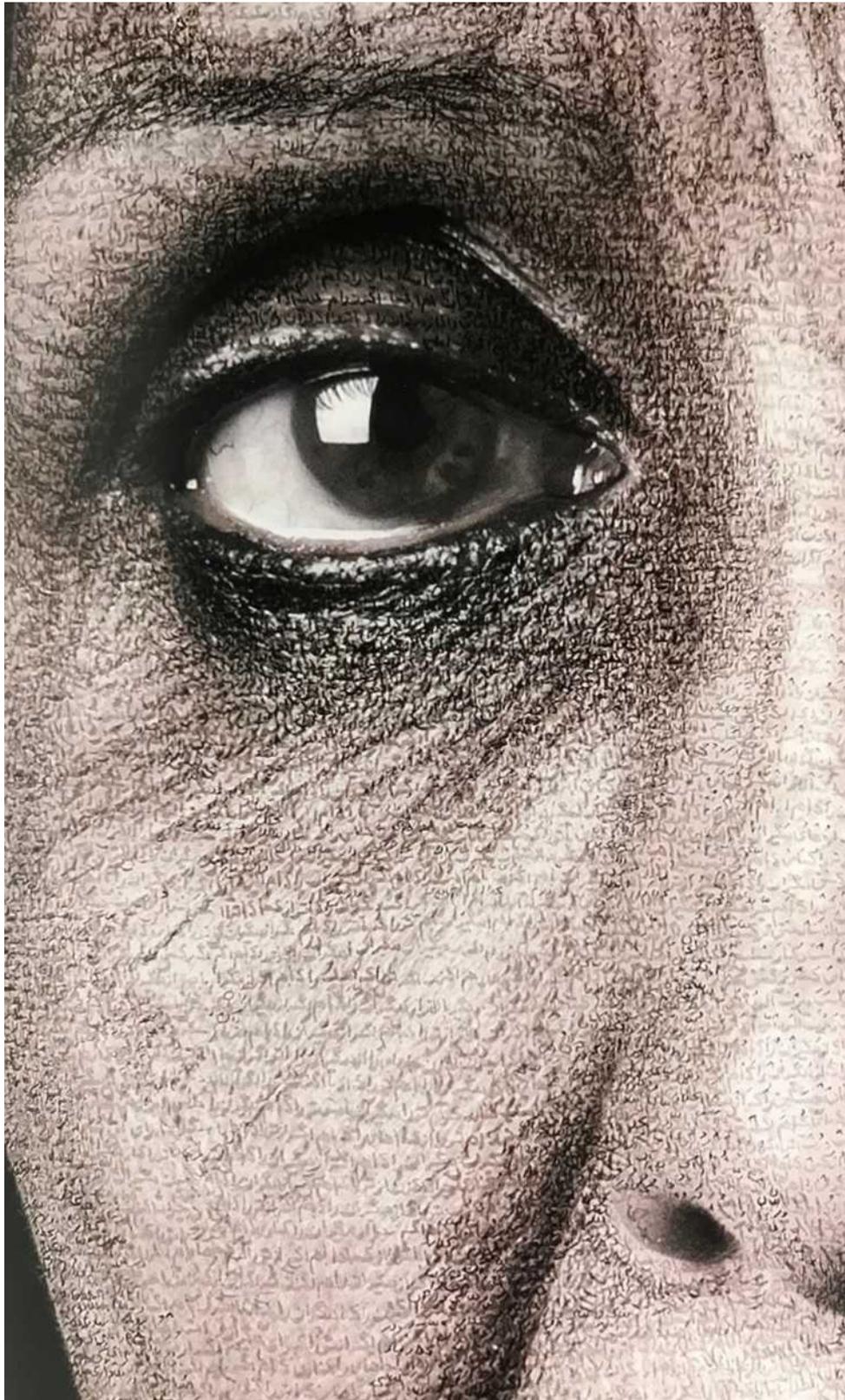


Fig. 22: Shirin Neshat, *Ghada* (detail), from *Our House Is on Fire* series, 2013. Ink on digital chromogenic print, 157.8 x 102.2 cm. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Fig. 23: Shirin Neshat, *Hassan*, from *Our House Is on Fire* series, 2013. Ink on digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48 in. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

The same geometric flowers decorate the feet of both images, along with well-defined and readable script. In the latter photograph, the text is Akhavan Sales 'A Cry' (see literary appendix p. 63) and the tag identifies the dead man as Alireza Khorsand, who was killed in the city of Shiraz. The photograph finally conflates the burning of the house, with the burning of one own self. This image could have been associated with documentary photography, however, the literary poem opposes this reading, as much as the tag that individuates another dead man, who died in Iran and not in Egypt, with the name of Alireza, not Hassan.

The legacy of *Our House Is on Fire* is very clear to the viewer who has seen Neshat's two previous photographic series, *Women of Allah* and *The Book of Kings*. The absence of the young generation makes the viewer aware of the calamity that causes the sorrow in the eyes of the elderly. In addition, these portraits are not documentary or ethnic representation of a culture or nation as the calligraphic script creates the means to provoke the sympathy or alienation of the viewer, underscored in the very title *Our House Is on Fire* (my emphasis). The use of the present tense 'Is' might reference a sense of haunting and a continuation of the tragedy, or on the contrary, might highlight its sudden happening.

Conclusion

A recent exhibition on Neshat ended in February 2019 at the GEM Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague. The exhibition, titled ‘Shirin Neshat: Poetry in Motion’, showed some photographs from *Women of Allah* series and four videos: *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), *Munis* (2008) and *Zarin* (2005). The accompanying catalogue translated the poems inscribed on *Women of Allah* and gave some information on the video production. This exhibition highlights the need to analyse and write more about the work of Neshat as the attention of the press and museums shows only a part of Neshat’s production, usually the most famous, and distorts the public opinion of her work. A broader perspective should be attained when trying to present a multifarious artist such as Neshat.

This dissertation is a first step on the path to analysing the development of a single trope in Neshat’s work: the representation of revolution, and how it evolved through time and place; even beyond the first famous series *Women of Allah*. All three photographic series have a different approach to the revolution referenced. The point of view shifts from a gendered representation of revolutionaries, to the roles in the political renovation of a country, to the final depiction of human loss.

The performativity of this photographic oeuvre is particularly held by the calligraphic script, that changes from series to series. The writing is a way to distance Neshat’s photography from the field of ethnography and documentary, as it gives voice to the sitters and enriches the representation of a historical moment with a specific cultural heritage. While in *Women of Allah* the calligraphy quotes women poets that lived during the 1979 revolution, or just before it, in *The Book of Kings* highlights the

legacy of the *Shahnameh*, whose millenary occurred in 2010.

To summarise, there are many strands that developed in Neshat's photographic series of revolution, but in fewer words it can be inferred that the artist develops a grounding of revolutionary ideological ideas. The viewer is left with a note of mourning on the destruction, rather than the redemption, that the 1979 revolution, the Green Movement and the Arab Spring were thought to bring about.

These three photographic series are an example of the power of art to cross national boundaries and to question the viewer, regardless of their country of origin. In addition, the performative production of meaning is demanded from the spectators mostly in *Our House Is on Fire*. This last series can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, the reality of human suffering can be read as stripping away the cryptic codes found in the *Women of Allah* series, as the writing is no longer accessible, only the universal human condition remains in front of the viewer. On the other hand, the very same image can be perceived as alienating in the eyes of the spectator, as the letters might resemble barbed wire and the unreadability of the script reaches its summit: no one, regardless of their knowledge, can read the words inscribed. Both readings are mirrored in the title as the pronoun 'our' might position the viewer pro or against the sitters. The performativity of these series is transferred from the sitters to the viewers, but is always at the heart of Neshat's photographic work in *Women of Allah*, *The Book of King* and *Our House Is on Fire*.

Literary Appendix⁷⁷

The poetry quoted on Neshat's images is carefully chosen, staged and mostly hand-written on her photographs in ink. The importance of the text is further enhanced when it becomes clear that parts of the poems are repeated or cut, according to her preference and artistic practice.

Each photograph's text is translated below. Some of the texts were unedited and were kindly translated by Naciem Nikkhah.

Offered Eyes (fig. 1, 2)

Forough Farrokhzad's poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' is quoted in many photographs by Neshat. In the photograph, the poem starts from the top right corner attached to the iris and follows downward. The second line follows towards the right. Then the poem restarts on the bottom left corner attached to the iris, and follows upwards (it is symbolised as * in the text below). Its second line follows on the left. The inside of the eye is framed by other repeating lines that say (top right to bottom left):

I grieve for the garden
I grieve for the garden
no one minds the flower no one minds the flower no one minds the
[fish no one wants to believe

The rest of the poem reads:

1 I grieve for the garden
no one minds the flower
no one minds the fish
no one wants to believe that
5 the garden is dying that the heart
I grieve
for the garden
no one minds
I grieve

⁷⁷ This appendix is not included in the word count and is exempted by permission.

10 *for*
 the garden
 *

I grieve for the garden
 from afar from behind
 no one thinks about

15 *the garden*
 I grieve
 for
 *the garden*⁷⁸

Verse 13 was added by Neshat as is not in the original text.

Untitled (fig. 3)

It has inscribed on the fingers an excerpt from Forough Farrokhzad's poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden':

1 *and the garden's feeling is some abstract thing*
 I grieve for the garden no [one] minds
 the flowers no one minds the fish no one
 *believes the garden is dying*⁷⁹

[the last line is not readable]

Written in the middle of the circular shape is *Ya Qamar Bani Hashim* (see footnote n.57)
 Quoted circularly underneath is Tehreh Saffarzadeh's poem 'The Height of Wakefulness'; even if the first line written in circle is still from Farrokhzad's 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' and reads:

5 *No one minds the fish the garden is dying the heart of the garden*
 has swollen under the sun the mind of the garden is slowly, slowly
 *draining of green memories*⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Original poem and translation published in Forough Farrokhzad, transl. Manavaz Alexanderian, *The Collection of Forough's Poems*, book 5: Let's Believe in the Beginning of Cold Season, Tehran, 2006, pp. 28-34 and pp. ۳۲-۳۹.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Then, Saffarzadeh's poem says:

Oh good
Oh my brother
10 *Oh watchful one*
as your bullets in the air
break my sleep,
as if by reflex, I pray for you,
*guardian of the liberating revolution*⁸¹

This repeats three times, and then the text is difficult to read.

Rebellious Silence (fig. 4)

The image quotes Saffarzadeh's 'The Height of Wakefulness':

I *Oh good*
Oh my brother
Oh watchful one
as your bullets in the air
break my sleep,
as if by reflex, I pray for you,
guardian of the liberating revolution.
Oh lonely hero,
watching against the nightly enemy,
*let God safeguard you from calamity.*⁸²

Then it repeats three times.

Allegiance with Wakefulness (fig. 5)

The text inscribed this time combined two poems by Saffarzadeh, the first is 'The Height of Wakefulness' (until v. 26), that is then followed by 'The Journey of the

⁸¹ Original poem published in Tehreh Saffarzadeh, *By'at ba bidari*, Tehran, 1980, p. 61. Translated in Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, New York, 1992, pp. 170-171.

⁸² Ibid.

Awakened' (vv. 27-36).

1 *Oh Guard,*
in the heart of the night's cold
you watch as if from outside
the house of your own body
5 *with tired eyelids*
-a night nurse-
so that the wounded city can rest
from the plunder of death.
Your wakefulness comes from earnest faith,
10 *your sincerity and al-Asr.⁸³*
Stories of your martyrdom
like martyrdom of the people
remain unheard,
they have no voice, no image, no date,
15 *they are unannounced.*
Oh light of the eyes,
Oh good
Oh my brother
Oh watchful one
20 *as your bullets in the air*
break my sleep,
as if by reflex, I pray for you,
guardian of the liberating revolution.
Oh lonely hero,
25 *watching against the nightly enemy,*
let God safeguard you from calamity.
Oh you martyr
hold my hands

⁸³ Al-Asr refers to Al-Asr Sura, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, see Milani (1992), *Ibid.*, p. 285.

30 *with your hands*
 cut from earthly means.
 Hold my hands,
 I am your poet,
 with an inflicted body,
 I've come to be with you
 35 *and on the promised day*
 *we shall rise again.*⁸⁴

Nida (fig. 15)

Nida presents once again a juxtaposition of different texts: vv. 1-8 are from Saffarzadeh's 'The Height of Wakefulness', while vv. 9-16 are by Farrokhzad from 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden'.

1 *Oh Guard,*
 in the heart of the night's cold
 you watch as if from outside
 the house of your own body
 5 *with tired eyelids*
 -a night nurse-
 so that the wounded city can rest
 from the plunder of death.

 no one minds the flower
 10 *no one minds the fish*
 no one wants to believe that
 the garden is dying
 draining of green memories
 and the gardens feeling
 15 *is some abstract thing*

⁸⁴ Milani (1992), *Ibid.*, pp. 170-172.

*rotting in the gardens solitude.*⁸⁵

Muhammad (fig. 16)

Similarly to *Nida*, *Muhammad* also presents a similar juxtaposition of the same poems by Saffarzadeh ‘The Height of Wakefulness’ (vv. 1-10) and Farrokhzad ‘I Feel Sorry for the Garden’ (vv. 11-18).

1 *in the heart of the night's cold*
 you watch as if from outside
 the house of your own body
 Oh good

5 *Oh my brother*
 Oh watchful one
 as your bullets in the air
 break my sleep,
 as if by reflex, I pray for you,

10 *guardian of the liberating revolution.*

no one minds the flower
 no one minds the fish
 no one wants to believe that
 the garden is dying

15 *draining of green memories*
 and the gardens feeling
 is some abstract thing
 *rotting in the gardens solitude.*⁸⁶

Mana (Fig. 17)

The poem quoted on *Mana* has been kindly translated here by Naciem Nikkhah as there are no published translations available. The poem is titled ‘Saga of Pain’ by Simin

⁸⁵ Ibid., and Farrokhzad, *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Behbahani:

1 *Is this me, the compassion ones, is this me,
 this spark that has turned into cold ashes?
 Is this me, the gracious ones, is this me,
 this wilted flower with fallen off petals?*

5 *Is this me, or is this the song that from the tār⁸⁷ of love
 sprang and disarrayed and was silenced?
 Is this me or is this the image of a hundred dreams
 that has been covered with the dust of forgetfulness?
 I was laughter on the lips of life*

10 *Suddenly I buried in horror
 I was charming in the eyes of dreams
 I became bloody tears and an incurable agony
 In the hand of the drunken one, I was the chalice
 He/she broke the chalice on top of a stone*

15 *I encountered the date of pain, the calendar of agony
 Insomuch as I distressed daily
 Is this me? Is it? Who am I, and what is sorrow?
 What happened to my loud laughter?
 Why am I so unhappy, why?*

20 *What happened to my familiar happy soul?
 When my hand was kissed by his/her red lips
 [why] my soul never felt excitement, it never became lucid?
 Once his/her tears fell on my foot
 [why] I couldn't find passion in my heart?*

25 *My eyes avoided his/hers
 [why] the thirst for his/her gaze was lost?
 What would the heart desire as a response,
 [when] he/she scolded and he/she screwed up
 Would you believe it my friends*

⁸⁷ The *tār*, is an Iranian stringed musical instrument.

30 *that this is me, that this dried up branch is me?*
Is this me, this soulless autumn garden
Is this me, this night without any stars is me?

Salah (fig. 18)

The poem written on Salah is ‘Of Death’ by Ahmad Shamlou. The poem is quoted on the photograph line by line, without the original disposition of verses (which is instead reproduced below). It is inscribed in repetition multiple times.

1 *I have never feared death,*
even though its hands are heavier than nothingness.
My fear, though, is of dying on a land
where the wage of a gravedigger
5 *is higher than*
the price of a human’s freedom.
Searching
Finding
and then
10 *Choosing at will,*
and to build a bulwark
out of oneself.
If death has a price higher than these,
*Never ever am I scared of death.*⁸⁸

Hassan (fig. 23)

Mehdi Akhavan Sales’s poem ‘A Cry’ is quoted in *Hassan* on the feet soles, the poem reads:

1 *I am sorry that*
My house is on fire,
soul burning, ablaze in every direction.

⁸⁸ Original text found in Ahmad Shamlou’s website: <http://shamlou.org/?p=147>.
Translated by Sina Ghasemi, in <http://sinarium.com/of-death-shamlou/>. Both accessed on 16th April 2019.

- 5 *Within the smoke of this raging fire*
 I sob from the inside
 wounded and burning
 I shout, scream, yelp
 Oh, it's burning
 from the inside.
- 10 *Oh Mary*
 from the inside I cry
 I pass out with the roar of the house burning
 I cry
 My house is on fire
 my enemy insidiously laugh
- 15 *my soul burns*
 I watch the burning flames from the rooftop
 *my house is on fire.*⁸⁹

On the tag hanging from the toe it is written:⁹⁰

National identity number: 1336

Country of residence: Iran

Name: Alireza

From: Kashan

Surname: Khorsand

Child of: Zahra

Father's name: Mohammad

Day of death: 3

Date and place of birth: 1336

Was killed: third of Ābān

Birth certificate number: 854

In the city of: Shiraz

⁸⁹ Original text in Mehdi Akhavan Sales, *Zamestan*, Tehran, 1992, pp. ۸۴-۸۵; Translated in Chiu and Ho, *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁹⁰ The tag was kindly translated here by Naciem Nikkhah; Aban = October-November, 1336 = 1957.

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