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Shirin Neshat
4 February - 16 April, 2006

In her work the photographer, filmmaker and video artist Shirin Neshat concentrates on the complexity of the boundaries in Islam: boundaries between man and woman, holy and profane, reality and magic. Shirin Neshat was born in Iran in 1957, and presently lives and works in New York. When she was 17 Neshat left her homeland for Los Angeles in order to attend art school. The Iranian revolution broke out and Ayatollah Khomeini seized power while she was in the United States. Only after sixteen years, in 1990, did she return for her first visit to her fatherland again. This renewed acquaintance made a deep impression on Neshat, and led directly to her work from the 1990s. The Stedelijk Museum is showing six works that give a good impression of her development over the past seven years. The earlier works – *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999) and *Passage* (2001) – are based on strong oppositions in form and content, while her approach in the latest works – *Mahdokht* (2004) and *Zarin* (2005) – is much more magical realism. The political aspect of her work is the most strongly represented by *The Last Word* (2003).



2

Turbulent, 1998
Two channel video/audio installation

Turbulent is the first of a series of films that Neshat devoted to male-female relations in the context of the social structure of Islamic Iran. Its main point of departure is the absence of women in music in public space. *Turbulent* takes the form of a musical duel between a male singer, performing a passionate love song with words by the great thirteenth-century mystic Rumi, and a female singer, Sussan Deyhim, performing her own eclectic composition. The public stand in the space between the two screens, as if spectators at a contest. As seen on the screens, the man sings to a full house, the woman to an empty auditorium. As the man lustily delivers a passionate traditional performance, the woman's vocalisation builds up to a level of emotional intensity that draws the attention of even the male singer and his audience. They too stare across at the facing screen, fascinated. Neshat visualises her narrative in terms of opposites such as black and white, male and female, full and empty auditoriums, stationary or rotating cameras, traditional or non-traditional music, the group or the individual, and rational and irrational. With *Turbulent* Neshat made a major step from photography to video installations and film. It was also the beginning of her collaboration with the composer and singer Sussan Deyhim, cameraman Ghasem Ebrahimi, and co-writer and co-producer Shoja Azari.



3

Rapture, 1999
Two channel video/audio installation

Rapture focuses on male/female relations against the background of culture and nature in an Islamic setting. As with *Turbulent*, here too the audience are forced to shift their attention back and forth between two facing projection screens. A small group of men in white shirts near a fort carry on an abstract dialogue with a number of black-veiled women in a natural landscape. The fort symbolises the typical male Islamic space, evoking associations with defence, boundaries, and walls against an enemy. The men, dressed as office workers, form an ironic contrast with the original function of the space.

The juxtaposition of the black-garbed women with nature is, on the other hand, timeless. Initially the women pray submissively in the barren desert; later – and clearly more assertively – they push a heavy boat from the hills toward the sea. This culminates in the remarkable escape of several women by sea in the boat. Whether this is a metaphor for suicide or liberation, their departure is undeniably an act of courage and self-determination.



4

Passage, 2001
Single channel video/audio installation

This collaboration with the American composer Philip Glass is an allegorical work that may be interpreted in many ways. The 'passage' of the title refers to the rites of passage surrounding death and rebirth, old and new, darkness and light. The film unrolls slowly in a compilation of three series of cinematic images. In the opening scene we are captivated by a pristine beach-scape at Essaouira, Morocco; in the distance a group of men approach carrying a corpse. Their mood is sombre, yet controlled and uncompromising. Simultaneously, in a desert landscape we see a clump of bobbing black shapes. They prove to be a group of veiled women, digging furiously in the rocky ground with their bare hands.

Their rhythmic, laborious breathing suggests the labour of birth or the sexual act; the primitive chant is reminiscent of a communal ritual. Finally, near the digging women, a solitary young girl builds a fire-circle of stones. The final shot of the film brings together all three elements in the same frame. As the journey of the men comes to an end, the fire-circle and the burial site are ready. As the body touches the ground the earth bursts into flame. The ritual reunion of the body with the earth is complete.



5

The Last Word, 2003
Single channel video/audio installation

The Last Word has a Kafkaesque theme: the interrogation and conviction of an artist, threatened by the bureaucratic establishment. The film provides a surreal and disturbing look into the mind of an Iranian woman writer confronted with her greatest fear: trial. As the image of the woman's face springs to life from the pages of written text, we enter the dark corridors of her mind. She drifts closer and closer to her interrogator, while images of fear, comfort and innocence pass before her eyes. Grim reality awaits close at hand: her interrogator and his assistants. She sits in silence as document after document are laid before her, 'proving' the danger her words form for the social order. A long table covered with books is the boundary between the woman and the dark world of her imagination, fantasy and memory, and the 'evidence-factory' of the powerful. The petty bureaucrats in their white shirts are busy searching through the texts and oversized tomes. Yet the woman artist has the final word.

Like Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*, with the power of her imagination and storytelling the woman is able to keep her interrogator under her spell and hence permanently dismantle his tyrannical killing machine. After the interrogator's exhausting tirade, the mere utterance of a poem brings the despot's entire system to a standstill. *The Last Word* can be considered Neshat's most direct and effective political work. Anyone familiar with the plight of Iranian writers and intellectuals sees the connection right away.



Mahdokht, 2004

Three channel video/audio installation

Mahdokht, inspired by a character from the surrealist novel *Women Without Men* (1979), by the Iranian author Shamush Parsipur, is a woman who suffers from sexual taboo: in her forties, she is still a virgin. She lives with deep anxieties about romantic love and sexuality, yet is consumed by an obsession with fertility. Torn by this dilemma, Mahdokht abandons the reality of her social, cultural and religious environment and takes refuge in her family's garden. There she chooses to end her life as a human, and plants herself to become a tree, so she may bear fruit and spread her seeds around the world. With this installation Neshat leads us into the garden through an opening at the bottom of a wall, explores the mystery of the garden, and then reveals Mahdokht's body floating motionlessly in the pond, at one with nature. As we approach Mahdokht's body we see fragmented images, glimpses into her past, her obsessions, and ultimately her madness.

Zarin, 2005

Single channel video/audio installation

Like *Mahdokht*, this film is also based on a character from the novel *Women Without Men*, by Shamush Parsipur. This latest film by Neshat, recently shot in Morocco, chronicles the emotional and psychological breakdown of a young woman, Zarin, who has been working as a prostitute in an Iranian brothel since childhood. One day, as she attends to one of her clients, it seems he no longer has a face. From that moment on, every client appears to her faceless. Overcome with feelings of horror and shame, she believes she has been struck by God's punishment: she has gone mad. She flees the brothel to seek redemption. Going to the *hammam* (public bath), she washes and scrubs her body until it bleeds, but as she emerges from the *hammam* she discovers that all the men in the street remain faceless. Frantically finding her way to a mosque, she begins to pray fervently, in the hope that God will forgive her for her indiscretions.

Educational and public activities

Guided tours

Upon request, guided tours can be provided for groups of up to 15 persons. Please reserve two weeks in advance. For information about prices and reservations go to desk@stedelijk.nl or telephone 020 573 2811. Price for schools: € 50 per hour; other groups € 85 per hour, in French, German or English: €105,50 per hour. Note: admission to the Museum is included in all guided tour prices.

Paradijs & Co

Want to know more about Iran? Visit the exhibition Paradijs & Co. in the Junior Tropical Museum, Amsterdam (until Feb. 10). See www.paradijsenco.nl

First Aid with Photography

The Dutch booklet *Eerste hulp bij fotografie* can be obtained at the information desk at the Stedelijk Museum. The questions in it assist pupils and others in looking at photography.

Eerste hulp bij fotografie can also be purchased in the Museum Shop for € 4,50.

- 1, 2 *Turbulent*, 1998
3. *Rapture*, 1999 (Women scattered)
4. *Passage*, 2001, production still
5. *The Last Word*, 2003
6. *Mahdokht*, 2004, production still

Cover, 7 *Zarin*, 2005, production still
 Courtesy LumenTravo, Amsterdam and Gladstone Gallery, New York

SMCS on 11

Thursday, February 2: Kader Abdolah and Shirin Neshat in conversation. Kader Abdolah fled his fatherland Iran in 1985 for political reasons. He settled in The Netherlands in 1988, and debuted in 1993 with his Dutch short story collection *De Adelaars* (The eagles). He has since published more books, and writes a weekly column in *de Volkskrant*. A short documentary (*Khaneh siah ast / The House is Black* by Forugh Farrokhzad, 1963) will be screened prior to their conversation. Thursday evenings March 2 and April 6 at SMCS on 11 will also be devoted to the exhibition 'Shirin Neshat'.

Bulletin

Stedelijk Museum Bulletin 1/2006 will include material on the exhibition *Shirin Neshat*. The *Bulletin* (Dutch/English) will appear in early March, and can be purchased in the Museum Shop for € 5,00.

Want to read more?

Musac. *Shirin Neshat. The Last Word*. ISBN: 88-8158-551-0
 Hamid Dabashi, Britta Schmitz, Beatrice E. Stammer & Catherine Nichols, Valentina Vitali. *Shirin Neshat*. ISBN 3-88609-506-1

Credits

Curator: Hripsimé Visser
 Text: Shoja Azari and Octavio Zaya
 With thanks to: MUSAC, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León
 Editing: Marie Baarspul
 Co-ordination: Rixt Hulshoff Pol
 Dutch translation of original English text: Rien Verhoef
 English translation of revised Dutch text: Don Mader
 Design: Mannschaft
 Printing: Robstolk®

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Coming at Stedelijk Museum CS 2006

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