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Facing Up to Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah*

By

Shahrazad Ehya

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Emerita Anne Middleton Wagner, Chair

Professor Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby

Professor Mino Moallem

Spring 2012

Facing Up to Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah*

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by

Shahrazad Ehya

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

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Professor Emerita Anne Middleton Wagner, Chair

This dissertation examines the early artistic production of contemporary Iranian American artist, Shirin Neshat, focusing in particular on her important breakthrough series of photographs, *Women of Allah* (1993-1997).

Although *Women of Allah* constitutes Neshat's most widely recognized and oft-reproduced production, the series' achievement remains little understood and insufficiently theorized. Opposing the prevailing tendency to read the photographs hermetically and as about the allegedly enduring vicissitudes of Muslim women's experience, this dissertation takes a wider, yet more historically specific, approach, contending that the series is insistently particular in its attempts to come to terms with the social and political consequences of Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1978-79.

Revealing *Women of Allah* as a project based on visual and textual citations and appropriations resonant particularly within Iranian and American contexts, this dissertation claims that the photographs construct a divided viewership, delimiting viewers according to such polarizing national distinctions — as either “Iranian” or “American.” Splitting viewers between those who can and cannot read the untranslated Iranian poems written on the photographs' surfaces, *Women of Allah* parallels the unresolved and combative nature of contemporary encounters between Iran and the U.S. This “superficial” split, however, also emphasizes the broader ways in which American and Iranian viewers approach Neshat's art with different frames of reference and cultural armatures, calling upon particular histories, senses and forms of knowledge — one primarily visual, the other textual or literary, but also oral/aural and embodied.

This dissertation therefore proposes to understand meaning in *Women of Allah* as multi-dimensional, dynamic and dialogical. As this study explores, *Women of Allah* repeatedly stages hyper-charged scenarios in which the viewer and the women in the photographs face off, the photographs eliciting distinct encounters depending on the habits and

capacities of their varied viewers. Appropriating and revising U.S. media representations of Iranians from the 1980s and early 90s, *Women of Allah* attends to the continued force that such representations command in American perceptions of, and confrontations with, Iran and Iranians today. At the same time, through its citations of well-known contemporary Iranian poetry, *Women of Allah* calls upon longstanding, if dynamic and ever-evolving, Iranian customary practices in which the quotation and recitation of poetry comprise a significant means of social exchange. Thus, the photographs also offer an exploratory inquiry into relations among secular and Muslim Iranians in the divided, post-revolutionary context and under the contemporary clerical Islamic regime.

Ultimately, sustained reflection upon *Women of Allah* reveals that it need not remain entirely divisive. Instead, insisting on recuperating historical memory within both Iran and the United States, these photographs provide bridges across national, political, cultural and religious divides, gesturing viewers toward ethical modes of engagement with Others in their world.

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FACING UP TO SHIRIN NESHAT'S *WOMEN OF ALLAH*

INTRODUCTION

Indeed, it seems to me that one writes into a field of writing that is invariably promisingly larger and less masterable than the one over which one maintains a provisional authority, and that the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas of which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful.

Judith Butler

In the lead up to a 1997 exhibition of six of Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographs at the small nonprofit, Artspeak Gallery, in Vancouver, Canada, curator Susan Edelstein wrote the artist a letter outlining "an interesting combination/ collaborative solution" to the problem she had been having finding an appropriate writer for the exhibition's catalogue text [figs. 1 and 2].¹ Following some initial setbacks — among them that her first choice of writer, Lebanese-Canadian artist Jayce Salloum, had declined the invitation to do the job — Edelstein's new idea was to team *two* writers to co-author the catalogue essay. According to this latest proposal, arrived at just months before publication, "writer/poet/feminist/managing editor" of a local academic quarterly, Jacqueline Larson, would join forces with Ahmad Tabrizi, a political refugee from Iran's post-revolutionary Islamic theocracy with a background in literature, art and design.

In her letter, Edelstein mentions that though she had in fact previously considered asking Larson to author the text, she eventually dropped the idea due to reservations about Larson's ability, "her being blue eyed and fair skinned," to produce "a complete, or as best as possible understanding" of Neshat's work — the "cultural difference" between Larson and Neshat was simply too vast. Nevertheless, if the outlines of Salloum's profile had initially identified him as the ideal candidate for the job — as an artist living in North America but with roots in the Middle East, Salloum could at once identify with Neshat's outsider status as well as knowledgeably comment on her art — Tabrizi's abilities and frames of reference, Edelstein quickly realized, allowed him unique and particular access to Neshat's work. As an Iranian, Tabrizi recognized the specific pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian imagery described in *Women of Allah*, and was able to read the Persian text written upon the photographs, providing the curator "with information and insights into [the] work that I had never had before." Such insights, Edelstein decided, though perhaps limited and incomplete in themselves, could complement the inevitable deficiencies of Larson's own analysis. Thus, the curator concludes, Larson and Tabrizi

¹ Unpublished correspondence, from Edelstein to Neshat, dated 1.29.1997, in the archive at Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The exhibition *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* at Artspeak Gallery was held from April 25-June 7, 1997. The remaining quotations in this paragraph and the following one are cited from Edelstein's 1.29.1997 letter to Neshat.

would together “provide us with an essay,” combining their knowledge in order to supply the best and most comprehensive account possible of *Women of Allah*.

The resulting publication indeed successfully brings together Larson’s “feminist analysis of the work” with Tabrizi’s “stories of living through the Iranian revolution,” as the curator puts it in her foreword.² However, between Edelstein’s letter and the catalogue’s publication, something significant had changed. In place of a single, co-authored essay, the catalogue puts forth two distinct and at times conflicting texts, the authors’ voices remaining isolated and discrete rather than harmonious and unified. Thus, in her foreword, Edelstein modifies her earlier vocabulary, now describing the catalogue as “*interweaving*” and “*braiding*” two authors’ different perspectives, the one “provid[ing] a counter” to the other.³ The terms are fitting, as each text addresses *Women of Allah* in its own way and according to its own distinct concerns, even as the two share space on the same pages.

Larson’s essay, “What if the Object Should Shoot? — ‘Women of Allah’ as Veiled Criticism,” provides a critically nuanced and insightful response to Neshat’s photographs. Deftly mobilizing theories of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said, among others, Larson offers a compelling feminist and postcolonial reading of *Women of Allah* — one that manages to be theoretically rigorous while still providing close examinations of particular works within the series.

Identified in the catalogue only as “Ahmad T.” — due to concerns, Edelstein explains, for the safety of his family in Iran — Tabrizi is presented from the outset as an atypical author, and his text indeed takes a dramatically different approach to Neshat’s work from that supplied by Larson.⁴ For starters, Ahmad T.’s text is untitled, it makes no use of critical theory, and provides no footnotes. Prompted by the photographs, Ahmad offers fragmentary descriptions of historical events witnessed, as well as of relevant Iranian religious and customary practices, political personas, and post-revolutionary circumstances the artworks seem to him to invoke. Occasionally, his account is personal, alluding to his own painful memories of Iran’s revolution. Ahmad T.’s portions of the catalogue thus illustrate how one particular viewer who recognizes the cultural codes and connotations in the photographs, and who lived through the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, relates to Neshat’s images. If his response relies on memory and experience, and his analysis is similarly affective, intimate and embodied, Larson’s essay by contrast is analytical and necessarily more distant from its subject.

Moreover, rather than develop as a linear and coherent text in the catalogue, Ahmad’s passages are disconnected, appearing in grey text boxes interspersed throughout the pages of Larson’s essay, reinforcing their status as fragmentary entries. The pairing of Larson and Ahmad T.’s voices in the catalogue can thus be jarring for the reader. For, brandishing its provocative title, Larson’s text begins the catalogue; however, the reader is repeatedly tempted to interrupt her reading of Larson’s essay in order to assimilate Ahmad’s secondary narrative. Whereas Larson’s prose adopts the requisite tone of

² Edelstein, “Foreword,” in *Shirin Neshat: “Women of Allah”* (Vancouver, B.C.: Artspeak Gallery, 1997), 2 and 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

critical distance and authority expected of a scholarly text, Ahmad's authorial voice varies stylistically depending on the content of the text-box entry, shifting from the journalistic, to the encyclopedic and illustrative, to the more straightforward and personal; when he writes about his own experience, Ahmad's tone is emphatic and impassioned ("I personally have been beaten by these idiots..."⁵). With no ostensible correlation or correspondence between the two texts — with no active relay, overlap or dialogue between them — shifting from one text to the other requires agility on the part of the reader, each text demanding and eliciting its own readerly frame of mind and mode of engagement.

The reaction to the Vancouver exhibition on the occasion of Neshat's gallery talk and catalogue launch at Artspeak was even more polarized and intense. According to an article in *The Georgia Straight*, attending Neshat's talk was a motley crew of "feminists, artists, and Artspeak supporters as well as members of Vancouver's expatriate Iranian community, some of them apparently political exiles from the Islamic revolution."⁶ The response to the work was divided precisely along these lines — Vancouver feminists and artistically-inclined public on one side, Iranian expats on the other:

Neshat's work... triggered heated criticism from some Iranian members of her audience. Some felt that her art was too sympathetic to the current regime in Iran... Others condemned her for attempting 'objectivity' in a context they thought demanded a reaction of outrage or passionate condemnation. The poetic nature of her work was seen as inadequate to address the issues of violence — murder, torture, political and religious persecution, censorship, and repression — associated with Islamic fundamentalism in Iran... Others — non-Iranians — observed that poetry was exactly the tool needed to keep the ideas 'complicated', to keep the viewer's thinking from 'shutting down', from becoming simplistic or dogmatic.⁷

During these debates, despite "the anger and incrimination, Neshat remained calm and unflustered," acknowledging, however, "that her subject matter and images are so potent, so 'explosive', that viewers cannot help but react emotionally to them, read their own histories and beliefs into them."⁸

Ultimately, the achievement of the Artspeak catalogue lies precisely in its built-in recognition that distinct viewers bring their own "histories and beliefs" into their readings of *Women of Allah*. In juxtaposing Larson and Ahmad's voices, in interweaving and braiding them together, the Artspeak catalogue allows each reading to maintain its own particular logic and coherence, allowing for difference, and even conflict, to cohabit and coexist in the same space.

⁵ Ahmad T., *Shirin Neshat: "Women of Allah"* (Vancouver, BC: Artspeak Gallery, 1997), 21.

⁶ Robin Laurence, "Explosive Images Provoke Strong Reactions: Women of Allah has been criticized as too hard—and too easy—on Iran's fundamentalist regime," *The Georgia Straight*, May 22-29, 1997, 59.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

This dissertation develops and pursues the implications of the divided approach to *Women of Allah* implicitly built into the Artspeak catalogue (and evidenced in the ensuing exhibition debate), even as it departs from many of the essayists' terms, categories and interpretations. In its incipient suggestion that viewers' varied encounters with *Women of Allah* play a significant role in the construction of the works' meaning, Artspeak provides a compelling framework through which to understand Neshat's photographs, proposing that we might begin better to understand *Women of Allah* by expanding our view of the photographs to include the spectators beyond their frames.

One of this dissertation's two fundamental premises is thus that meaning in *Women of Allah* is not hermetic — it is not fully accounted for or exhausted by the imagery contained within the borders of the photographic frames. Whereas the majority of Neshat's critics base their analyses of *Women of Allah* on its immediate and provocative visual content, insisting that the series concerns the plight of the Iranian/Muslim⁹ women represented — these photographs “deal with the way women in Iran are living today... reflect[ing] their roles,” writes one early critic; they “excavat[e] the sometimes ghostly presence of women under Islam,” claims another — this dissertation aims to amplify and broaden the parameters through which Neshat's art is understood.¹⁰

For although *Women of Allah* represents the Iranian/Muslim woman in the *chador*, and the photographs might thus ostensibly appear to be *about* her, the figures in the artworks always also reach out to the viewer through the women's frontal posture and return gaze, as well as other means — significant and consistent visual details that the art criticism and scholarship have hitherto failed fully to consider or theorize. Summoning the viewer's embodied presence, *Women of Allah* incorporates the viewer into the fold of the artwork and its network of meaning, eliciting the viewer as an active subject in a

⁹ In referring to the women in the photographs as “Muslim/Iranian” women, I do not mean to suggest that these terms are interchangeable; rather, my language reflects the way in which the terms are consistently conflated within the art criticism. Thus, even if Neshat was aiming in *Women of Allah* to represent and think through problems faced by Iranian women following the Islamic Revolution, the art criticism has often taken *Women of Allah* to be representative of Muslim women's concerns more broadly. In Iftikhar Dadi's insightful analysis of *Women of Allah*, the art historian claims that the conflation was deliberately produced by the artist: “Although one might correctly argue that any project that claims to represent all women in Islam is meaningless since the category of Muslim women is extremely diverse even in a single country such as postrevolutionary Iran, it is precisely Neshat's canny recognition of the easy slippage between stock media imagery of revolutionary Iranian women as metonymic of Muslim women that has brought the artist's... work to prominence” (“Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 [2008], 128). Whether or not Neshat was aware at the time that her imagery would be interpreted as emblematic of the condition of “Muslim” women in general, the fact remains that it has, drastically reducing the complex heterogeneity of Muslim women, their beliefs and experiences. As I will claim toward the end of this introduction, however, because of this “slippage” that Dadi describes, Neshat's artworks intervene not only in representations of Iranian women, but also in representations of Muslim women and Islam more generally.

¹⁰ Peter Herbstreuth, “Venice: Transculture, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin,” *Siksi* 3 (1995), 53, and Leslie Camhi, “Lifting the Veil: Shirin Neshat uses video and photographs to explore the status of women in Islam,” *Artnews* 99, February 2000, 149, respectively.

dynamic and reciprocal exchange with the works.¹¹ To appropriate Mikhail Bakhtin's term describing the role of the word, or the utterance, within verbal discourse, we might say that these works behave *dialogically*. According to Bakhtin, "every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates."¹² The women in *Women of Allah*, I contend, similarly prompt and await the viewer's answering word or next move. Indeed, Neshat herself perhaps suggests as much, claiming her work "only ask[s] questions," never answering them — "I'm creating work simply to entice a dialogue," the artist states.¹³

However, while Neshat's claim might assume an expansive scope for her work's audience, this dissertation proposes that *Women of Allah* stages *distinct* encounters and entices *particular* dialogues, interpellating viewers delineated by polarizing national distinctions. If the Artspeak catalogue might have suggested *Women of Allah*'s viewers could effectively be understood as "Iranian" and "Canadian", this study claims the categories would more aptly be defined as "Iranian" and "American." For this dissertation's second central premise is that *Women of Allah* is a project based on visual and textual citations and appropriations particularly resonant within Iranian and American contexts. Thus, while Neshat's photographs visually quote 19th- and 20th-century Orientalist painting and colonial photography, above all they quote representations of Iranians in the American media in the wake of Iran's Islamic Revolution (January 1978 – February 1979) — representations that served to inspire the profound animosity and fear of Americans towards Iran and Iranians. At the same time, through citations of well-known contemporary Iranian poetry, which Neshat handwrites in ink on the surfaces of her photographs, *Women of Allah* also calls upon longstanding Iranian cultural and customary traditions privileging the word over the image, and in which the recitation and invocation of poetry comprise a significant means of social exchange. It is, indeed, the incorporation of this poetry that constructs *Women of Allah*'s divided viewership, manifestly splitting viewers between those who can and cannot read the untranslated Persian words written upon the surfaces of the photographs. This "superficial" split, however, only emphasizes the broader ways in which viewers approach Neshat's art with different frames of reference and cultural armatures, summoning *particular* histories, senses and forms of knowledge — one primarily visual, the other textual or literary, but also oral/aural and embodied. Interpellating its viewers as either "Iranian" or "American", *Women of Allah* thematizes their divisiveness, reducing complex realities to simple, oppositional nationalist categories and paralleling the unresolved and combative nature of contemporary encounters between Iran and the U.S. Nevertheless, as the Artspeak catalogue also suggests, sustained reflection upon *Women of Allah* reveals that ultimately it need not remain entirely divisive; instead, these

¹¹ Thus, in Larson's words, "[a]s much as [the photographs] are about Iranian women, the images are also about America's gaze and what is repetitive about the looking, what America expects to see. If we look to Neshat's work to explain 'Iranian women' — to speak for them or as one — we are kept at a distance" ("What if the Object Should Shoot? — 'Women of Allah' as Veiled Criticism," *Shirin Neshat: "Women of Allah"* [Vancouver, BC: Artspeak Gallery, 1997], 7).

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 280.

¹³ Susan Horsburgh, "The Great Divide," *Time Europe* 156, no. 9 (August 28, 2000), 44-45.

photographs maintain difference, while offering bridges between such long-established divides.

Although Neshat's appropriations in *Women of Allah* take both visual and verbal form, in accounting for *Women of Allah* in terms of appropriation and the situational encounter with the viewer, it can be helpful briefly to consider Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the role of utterances and appropriation within linguistic discourse.

In his chapter, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin insists on understanding language as an active and dynamic social phenomenon rather than as a fixed "system of abstract grammatical categories."¹⁴ Thus, the utterance, which Bakhtin describes as the "embodiment of a speech act," is an active participant in speech and, as such, is dialogical in various ways.¹⁵ To begin, any given utterance is implicitly in dialogue with other, prior expressions of the same word. The speaker therefore is an *appropriator* of words; borrowing or taking from preexisting vocabularies, the speaker must as a result contend with the fact that words are never neutral, always also "exist[ing] in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions"¹⁶:

[A]ny concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped... by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words... and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.¹⁷

It is within this saturated living field that the utterance erupts, previous speakers always animating the word with their own meanings and values. However, while the word is always "populated"¹⁸ by other, already spoken layers of its expression, the speaker also fills it with "his own intention, his own accent... adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention," his utterance "breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression..."¹⁹ In dialogue with the various networks out of which it emerges, the utterance is also an active participant within those networks, manipulating them, revising them, and acting "as a rejoinder" to them.²⁰

The links and interrelationships between an utterance, its object, and the "thousands of living dialogic threads" coexisting within its own "historical moment [and] socially specific environment", is, however, only one component of the utterance's dialogism.²¹ The other involves the utterance's participation within the particular context

¹⁴ Bakhtin, 271.

¹⁵ Ibid., 272.

¹⁶ Ibid., 294.

¹⁷ Ibid., 276.

¹⁸ Ibid., 294.

¹⁹ Ibid., 293 and 277, respectively.

²⁰ Ibid., 284.

²¹ Ibid., 276.

“in which it lives and takes shape.”²² For the utterance also participates in “living conversation” and thus:

... is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.²³

In laying emphasis on the answering word, Bakhtin thus stresses the role of the *listener* in shaping the speaker’s utterance. It is toward the listener — who assimilates the word into her own “specific world,” “conceptual horizon,” and “apperceptive background” — that the speaker orients his speech, as he “strives to get a reading on his own word... within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver.”²⁴ While the listener’s understanding is crucial, Bakhtin suggests that primacy might ultimately “belong to the response,” for the response is “the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding...”²⁵ At the end of the day, it is not only the listener’s conceptual grasp of the utterance that matters. What is ultimately of consequence — what can ultimately be transformative in the world — is the form she gives to her understanding; for, ultimately, it is the listener’s response that helps to give the word *new* contours, enriching the word with new meanings and creating the ground for future forms of dialogue and exchange.

Like the utterance, which for Bakhtin is always appropriative, Neshat’s photographs always refer back — to American visual culture, to contemporary Iranian poetry — to the grammar, that is, of preexisting visual vocabularies, at the same time as they also revise those vocabularies, actively participating in the present moment and with contemporary viewers in the construction of new meanings and values. Bakhtin’s account can moreover be useful in the assessment of *Women of Allah* for its implicit suggestion that appropriation might be a potentially inadvertent and unintentional act, as much as a deliberate and calculating one. In “living conversation,” speakers are not always attentive or alert to the thousands of dialogic threads with which their words are implicitly interwoven. Indeed, Neshat herself never uses the term “appropriation” to describe her art, and when asked about the relationship between her work and Western art history and visual culture, she states, “people have said that the scenes [in my] photographs... look like well-known Western images, like [Jean-Léon] Gérôme [*sic*], but I had no knowledge of those paintings or [colonial] photography when I made those images.”²⁶ Neshat’s appropriations in *Women of Allah*, while often evocative of particular paintings and

²² Bakhtin, 272.

²³ Bakhtin, 280.

²⁴ Bakhtin, 280 and 282. Bakhtin continues on to say, “All rhetorical forms... are oriented toward the listener and his answer... It is highly significant for rhetoric that this relationship toward the concrete listener, taking him into account, is a relationship that enters into the very internal construction of rhetorical discourse” (280).

²⁵ Bakhtin 282.

²⁶ Author interview with Neshat 6.1.10, San Francisco, California.

photographs, never replicate those images exactly (in the way, for example, that British-Iraqi artist Jananne al-Ani's *Untitled* might be said to [fig. 3]²⁷). Thus, rather than restrict our definition of appropriation to one of calculating critique, we might consider *Women of Allah* to register the pervasiveness of the trope of the veiled, Iranian/Muslim woman in contemporary discourse; incorporating Neshat's own body into the works, *Women of Allah* might indicate as much the way in which representations act on us, as we do on them.

Bakhtin's theorization of verbal discourse thus goes only so far towards accounting for the visual artwork, as *Women of Allah* evidences the way in which appropriations, and their dialogism, might not only be verbal but also visual and embodied. An Iranian woman living in the United States since the mid-1970s, Neshat witnessed Iran's Revolution, as well as the ensuing "Iranian Hostage Crisis" (November 1979-January 1981) and Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), from afar, and was surely impressed and affected by these events and their representation in the media. Thus, in appropriating the image of the veiled, Muslim/Iranian woman, *Women of Allah* at once engages a long history, in which visualizing and gendering the East has played a prominent role in the West's claim to render it intelligible, knowable, and conquerable,²⁸ as well as a more recent discourse within which women's veils have come to represent Islam's irreducible, and increasingly terrifying, difference from Western ideologies.²⁹ In her study of the 2004 French controversy over the Muslim headscarf, historian Joan Wallach Scott claims that the veil first became politicized and "associated with dangerous militancy" not, as many today might suppose, as a result of the events of September 11, 2001, but rather during the Algerian War for Independence (1954-1962), when women's veils were used as an effective instrument by the Algerian resistance against the French colonial occupation.³⁰ Given that her analysis centers on perceptions of the veil and Muslims in France, Scott leaves out, however, that the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath gave the association between veiling and militancy renewed urgency in the 1980s, perhaps in particular in the

²⁷ In contrast to *Women of Allah*, al-Ani's work is actively in dialogue with Orientalist art-historical and visual-cultural precedent. In the 2003 exhibition, *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, that al-Ani co-curated — with Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros — for the Institute of International Visual Arts in London, al-Ani displayed Orientalist paintings by Henri Matisse and examples of French colonial photography alongside her own work and that of other contemporary artists working in a similar vein (including works by Neshat). In her essay for the exhibition catalogue, al-Ani offers a historiography of visual and discursive representations of the veil since the nineteenth century (Jananne al-Ani, "Acting Out," *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art* [London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2003], 88-107). Although later in her career Neshat would occasionally invoke the relevance of colonial discourse to her work, it is not clear that at the start of her series she recognized her photographs' relationship to colonial visual culture (see Chapter Two).

²⁸ For analyses of 19th- and 20th-century colonial visual representations of women, see Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), and Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

²⁹ For one such recent study, see Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³⁰ Scott, 61.

United States during and subsequent to the hostage ordeal, as representations of women wearing the black *chador* and armed for the revolutionary struggle were disseminated through the press, often standing in as visual signifiers of Iran's fanaticism, antimodernism and insidious difference from Western values [fig. 4].

While *Women of Allah* takes up the overdetermined trope of the veiled, Muslim/Iranian woman as it functions within the American context, the series also engages the way in which women's bodies, veiled or unveiled, have been marshaled within Iran since the early 20th century to symbolize culture, nation, and national ideology. If veiling was banned by the first Pahlavi monarch in 1936 as a means both of purging manifestations of Islamic identity from Iran and of representing the nation's ideological alignment with modern, western values, following the revolution, the veil was again made compulsory, institutionalizing modern Iranian indigeneity as affiliated with a particular conception of Shi'a Islam and purifying the nation of foreign contamination, exposed on the bodies of unveiled, "Westoxicated" women.³¹ *Women of Allah* thus participates in a range of topical debates — contested within both Iran and the U.S. — that exceed Muslim or Iranian women, even while enlisting their image. Echoing the very language and terms of these debates, *Women of Allah* confronts viewers directly with images akin to those that have sparked so much controversy, suspicion, and animosity in both countries. At the same time, while *Women of Allah* appropriates the visual language of these debates, it also importantly revises and amends its appropriations. Representing a solitary figure rather than a mass of women in the *chador*, incorporating inscriptions of Iranian poetry onto the photographs' surfaces, and staging direct encounters between the women in the photographs and the viewer, *Women of Allah* prompts viewers to engage face-to-face with a figure they might otherwise pity, fear, or shun. Summoning but revising this pervasive and pernicious visual language, the figures in *Women of Allah* "converse" with their varied viewers, encouraging viewers to recall history, transforming them into active, embodied subjects, and ultimately inclining their bodies toward ethical encounters and exchanges.

Chapter One sets the stage for such an analysis by investigating hitherto unexamined works from Neshat's earliest art practice — works from the late 1980s and early 1990s that predate the *Women of Allah* series, and that shed light on Neshat's emergent interest in a practice emphasizing the contingent encounter with the work of art, framed by the historically and culturally specific categories that organize viewers' experiences and shape their approaches to artworks. Deconstructing the prevailing myth of the origins of Neshat's art practice — understood to have been borne out of the artist's first return visit to Iran after the Islamic Revolution — Chapter One situates *Women of*

³¹ *Gharbzadegi*, or "Westoxication," is a word coined by Iranian cultural critic, Jalal-e Al-e Ahmad, in his 1962 book of the same name. The word, which has alternately been translated as "Occidentosis," "Westitis," or "West-struckness," gained cultural currency in the 1960s, and was used within both secular and religious circles opposing the Shah to describe Westernization as a pernicious, foreign contaminant within Iran. See Chapter Three for a wider discussion of this term.

Allah as in dialogue at once with Iranian social practices and poetic culture *and* with American economies of visual representation.

Chapters Two and Three pursue the implications of this inquiry in distinct but parallel fashions. Examining the *Women of Allah*, both chapters build on the “interweaving” and “braiding” of different perspectives submitted in the Artspeak catalogue, analyzing *Women of Allah* on the basis of the particular social, historical, visual and textual frames of reference the series invokes, and the visual and embodied capacities it elicits. Thus, Chapter Two considers *Women of Allah* in terms of its American context and reception, while Chapter Three takes up how the photographs might function differently in an Iranian context, proposing that *Women of Allah* imagines addressing Iranians at home, from Neshat’s displaced position in the U.S.

Chapter Two examines the art-critical and scholarly reception of *Women of Allah*, claiming that, to large extent, if to varying degrees, viewers have failed truly to engage the complexity of this body of work, delimiting its message to one about the plight of women in Muslim societies. Thus, Neshat’s photographs tend to be understood by the majority of her reviewers to express either the oppression of Muslim/Iranian women and their submission to a harsh, patriarchal authority, or their resistance to Western stereotypes and assumptions concerning the presumed passivity of Muslim women. Although each reading interprets the content of Neshat’s photographs differently, most assume a monolithic, homogeneous and uniformly threatening Islam, and few move much past understanding Neshat’s work as a transparent document of its subject. As a corrective to such an approach, this chapter contextualizes *Women of Allah* in terms of appropriation and the photographs’ relationship to visual and discursive representations of Iranians in the American media during the 1980s and early 1990s — in the period, that is, directly preceding Neshat’s commencement of work on her series. Insisting on historical specificity and complexity, and arguing that these works engage American perceptions of Iran and Iranians in the 1980s and 90s, this chapter refuses the elision, pervasive in the critical literature on Neshat’s art, between the status of the women represented in *Women of Allah* with the experience of “Muslim” women as a “whole.”

Moving between close readings of the photographs and consideration of the larger social and historical issues they evoke, this chapter proposes that the interplay between text and image in *Women of Allah* provokes a complex and dynamic visual experience — particularly for viewers who cannot read the poetic citations written on the surfaces of the photographs. Having made the case that *Women of Allah* concerns viewers’ perceptions, I show that the works raise highly charged visual questions about the woman’s status — as tangible or perceptual thing, as “real” person or metaphorical image, as documentary or dramatic figure. Opposing critics’ tendency to refer to *Women of Allah* as though the various photographs within the series share a consistent strategy and meaning, the second half of this chapter focuses on the implications of this strange dialectic as it occurs in one of the works in particular. Ultimately, *Faceless* offers a cautionary tale for its viewers, demanding that viewers acknowledge the risks, as well as the ethical responsibilities, of seeing. Recalling the failed communications between Iran and the United States in the early 1980s during the hostage crisis, *Faceless* warns viewers against repeating the same mistakes, insisting instead on historical specificity, and refusing our hasty assumptions about Others whose values we might not share. Failing to do so, *Faceless* claims, we take the great risk of bringing into being the very enemies we feared in the first place.

Chapter Three proposes an entirely different and new reading of *Women of Allah*, taking up at once the meaning of the poems written upon the photographs' surfaces and the artworks' engagement with Iranian cultural and customary practices of poetic citation and recitation. Considering the gestural habits and social role of poetic invocation in Iran, this chapter claims that *Women of Allah* engages the way in which poetry serves as a significant means through which Iranians relate to themselves and one another, shaping their understandings of, and approaches to, their history, present and future.

What follows, then, are close readings of four works from the *Women of Allah* series. In their invocations of poetry by well-known Iranian women poets Forugh Farrokhzad (1932-1965) and Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008), I propose that the women in these artworks summon viewers to recall the histories and social realities within which the poems emerged and to which they are responsive: the increasingly westernized culture of the 1960s in Iran, and the tense revolutionary moment of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thus, I contend, *Women of Allah* engages the way in which the ideologies of both the secular-modernist Pahlavi monarchy and the post-revolutionary Islamist theocracy entailed the attempted elimination of manifestations of Iranian identity and culture that many deemed inseparable from it — each regime claiming to represent the authentic Iran, suppressing difference in the name of an absolutist, unified, and homogeneous state. Taking up the role that women's bodies and veils played within the various ideological discourses of these historical moments, *Women of Allah* refuses such historical erasures, and insists upon the recovery of social memory. As a feminist project, moreover, while *Women of Allah* underscores a commitment to investigating the wisdom articulated in women's poetry, it also problematizes understandings of feminism in Iran, engaging both secular and religious feminisms. Finally, as this chapter goes on to demonstrate, in their recitation of poems by Farrokhzad and Saffarzadeh, the women in *Women of Allah* also reiterate and revise the poems according to their own present contexts, engaging viewers in a dynamic and embodied social exchange, asking them to remember and retrieve history toward an ethical reformulation of the future.

Together, these three chapters reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of *Women of Allah*. Proposing a new framework for understanding this series, *Facing up to Shirin Neshat's Women of Allah* prompts us to consider the strength and validity of different responses to the work, based on the particular histories, capacities, habits, and knowledges viewers bring with them in their approach to the work of art. As this dissertation aims to show, close consideration of the different encounters the works stage with their varied viewers can help us better to understand *Women of Allah's* intervention into the role that images of Muslim/Iranian women have played in shaping perceptions of Iran and Islam since the late 1970s, as well as the broader role that representations play in today's increasingly combative encounters between the Western and Islamic worlds.

The wider relevance of scholarly analysis of Neshat's photographic project should thus not be underestimated. For issues of representation have mattered deeply in the context of the geopolitical conflict between Iran and the United States, and between citizens of Western and Muslim nations more broadly. Representation mattered in the aftermath of the 2005 Danish publication of twelve editorial cartoons caricaturing the

Muslim prophet Muhammad, leading to protests across the Muslim world and the West and in over a hundred deaths.³² It mattered in the agitated debates surrounding the construction of the Muslim community center, Park51, blocks away from Ground Zero in New York City, alienating ordinary Muslims by equating them with a minority of Islamist radicals whose values they did not share.³³ And they continue to matter in the persistent rhetorical crusades waged by politicians and the media, helping to solidify Islam's constitutive place as a locus of fear in the Euro-American imaginary and aggravating tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. Emulating the form and content of some of today's most polarizing and incendiary images, *Women of Allah* thus takes up the way in which representations intervene in the world — inspiring belief, hatred, or passion. Historicizing Neshat's art, this dissertation maintains that while *Women of Allah* is inextricable from its context, it also poses alternatives to it, gesturing beyond this context and toward modes of corporeal encounter and dialogue that speak to the viability of different, more ethical relations between the Western and Muslim worlds.

What would it be like, then, to understand *Women of Allah* in terms of dialogue and appropriation? To do so would necessitate a refusal of the kind of understanding the artworks have typically elicited thus far. It would mean opening the artworks up to active interpretation, understanding them not as closed, hermetic entities containing within them a single, unified message, but rather as “shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents.”³⁴ It would mean recognizing Neshat's language as quoting vocabularies that have signified, and continue to signify, differently in different contexts — and as in dialogue with their varied meanings and histories. It would mean, finally, opening up our understanding of the photographs to include the viewers beyond their boundaries, acknowledging that the images speak to, and with, viewers in particular ways — viewers whose own histories, sets of knowledge, and apperceptive backgrounds enrich and complicate the artworks' meaning. Ultimately, in exploring how *Women of Allah* engages history and our present, it aims to think through the means these artworks offer of reformulating the future.

³² See Jen Gerson, “Art plus Islam. Minus controversy,” *The Toronto Star*, July 14, 2007, ID04, and Henry Samuel Paris, “Prophet Mohammed in cartoons: a history,” *The Telegraph*, November 2, 2011 (web publication), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8864935/Prophet-Mohammed-in-cartoons-a-history.html>.

³³ See, for example, Javier C. Hernandez, “Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2010, A22.

³⁴ Bakhtin, 276.

CHAPTER ONE: AN HOMAGE TO ORIGINS AND ORIGIN STORIES

The most frequently repeated account of Shirin Neshat's artistic inception is filled with holes and inaccuracies, but it is marvelously brief, powerful and dramatic. In this version of the story, Neshat suddenly materialized onto the New York art scene in April 1993, with a month-long solo exhibition staged at the well-known alternative art space, Franklin Furnace Gallery, in lower Manhattan (April 2 – May 1, 1993). Having stumbled, “by total accident”, upon a flyer requesting emerging artists to submit proposals for a show, Neshat decided to give it a go, despite her complete abandonment of art-making upon her receipt of an M.F.A. in painting from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1982, and her subsequent move to New York City, where, “happy just to be an observer”, she simply “wasn't interested” in being an artist¹: “I didn't think about being an artist for another ten years,” Neshat explains, “it took me that long before I was mentally prepared.”² To her dismay, Neshat's proposal was accepted, and “this became the beginning, exactly ten years after I arrived in New York City.”³

In place of an art practice, Neshat took odd jobs, finally working with her (now ex-) husband, Kyong Park, as co-Directors of Storefront for Art and Architecture, the non-profit space in SoHo founded by Park devoted to exhibiting socially- and environmentally-responsible art and architecture.⁴ For Neshat, Storefront was a laboratory, introducing her to artists, architects, critics and curators — many of whom would eventually help to promote her career — and teaching her “how creative people actually function.”⁵ “[I]t wasn't just that they went to a studio, stood in front of a blank wall and said I'll see what I have to say to the world today,” Neshat learned; instead, “a lot of their work was based on research.”⁶ Dismissing her U.C. Berkeley training, Neshat today refers to her Storefront years as her “true education,” schooling her not only in

¹ Youssef Nabil, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” in *Youssef Nabil: I Won't Let You Die* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 18 and 17, respectively.

² Suzie Mackenzie, “An Unveiling,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2000, 22. The narrative surfaces repeatedly in accounts of Neshat's career. See also Lina Bertucci, “Shirin Neshat: Eastern Values,” *Flash Art* 30, no. 197, (November-December 1997): 84-87, and RoseLee Goldberg, “Shirin Neshat. Material Witness,” in *Shirin Neshat* (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2002): “For years she kept herself apart from art making, possibly considering her observations too prosaic, to such an extent that she was surprised by her sudden profession of artistic faith when it came after her first visit in more than a decade to Iran in 1990, at age 33” (66).

³ Nabil, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” 18.

⁴ Neshat worked for approximately eleven years at Storefront for Art and Architecture, first as Associate Director (1987-1988), and then as Co-Director (1988–1998), before leaving to focus on her career. Since her departure, she has remained on Storefront's advisory board.

⁵ Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, “Every Frame a Photograph: Shirin Neshat in Conversation,” *Border Crossings* 28, no. 1 (February 2009): 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*

artists' working methods, but also in contemporary theories of art and architecture, and enabling her to "develop [her] own ideas and methodologies."⁷

What ultimately roused Neshat from her decade-long artistic slumber was a visit in 1990 to her native Iran — her first since the 1978-79 revolution that ousted the west-leaning Pahlavi monarchy, replacing it with the Islamic Republic.⁸ "The trip unleashed a powerful creative drive in Neshat", writes one reviewer, citing Neshat's "shock" at the "changes the revolution had brought to women" as her artistic catalyst upon returning to the United States.⁹ According to another reviewer, Neshat simply could not have produced art prior to her return to Iran, attributing Neshat's artistic inactivity to the effects of her displacement from homeland and family, as well as her wholesale immersion into Western life, on her senses of self and identity: "Without a mother, a father, a homeland, without loyalties, ambitions, she could no longer make sense of herself. She certainly couldn't be an artist. There were no tensions out of which to make art."¹⁰ Neshat's long-awaited homecoming thus presented the artist not only with a radically-transformed country, but also with a renewed sense of identity and purpose, engendering her artistic formation by giving her a set of terms, women in Islam — a productive tension, in other words — that would sustain her emergent practice.

So, Neshat returned to New York with "some ideas,"¹¹ and, responding to her encounter with the transformed country she witnessed in Iran, she wrote her submission to Franklin Furnace, proposing an exhibition focused on "the emotional and psychological conditions of [contemporary Iranian] women underneath [*sic*] the veil."¹² Anticipating *Women of Allah's* sleek aesthetic style and timely explorations into the status of women in Iranian and Islamic societies, *Unveiling* was an instant success. If Franklin Furnace was the birthplace of Neshat's now internationally renowned artistic practice, post-Revolutionary Iran was indisputably its site of conception.

A longer version of this narrative is, predictably, considerably more intricate and complex. Neshat was born in 1957 to an upper middle class family in the religious city of Qazvin, northwest of Tehran. Her mother was a housewife, and her father a doctor — both westernized, secular Muslims, and supporters of the Shah. Like many members of his generation and social class in Iran, Neshat's father favored a western education for his

⁷ Scott MacDonald, "Shirin Neshat," in *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 326.

⁸ Neshat says of this moment: "That trip realigned me to Iran. It also made me want to do art, something I had stopped doing since Berkeley" (Susan Tenaglia, "The Power of the Veil: Shirin Neshat's Iran," *The World and I* 17, no. 12 [December 2002]: 97). For more examples of this account in the narrative of Neshat's artistic origins, see also Francine Birbragher, "Shirin Neshat," *Art Nexus* 2, no. 50, September 2003, 90; Arthur C. Danto, "Shirin Neshat" *BOMB* 73 (Fall 2000): 62; MacDonald, 326; and Richard Williams, "The Exotic and the Everyday," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2002, 14.

⁹ Tenaglia, 97 and 96, respectively.

¹⁰ Mackenzie, 22.

¹¹ Nabil, 18.

¹² Shirin Neshat, unpublished project proposal submitted to Franklin Furnace Gallery, for the Fund for Performance Art for Emerging Artists, n.d. Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives, New York, in the file "Documentation."

children, enrolling them in an Italian Catholic school, and then sending them abroad to complete high school and college. Neshat was seventeen when she left Qazvin, in 1975, first for Los Angeles to join her older sisters, and then to Northern California where she began her higher education studies at the Dominican College of San Rafael before transferring to U.C. Berkeley.¹³ Though she returned to Iran several times following her intercontinental move, Neshat's visits came to an abrupt halt by early 1979 — a result not only of the tumultuous Islamic Revolution, but also, of the succeeding eight-year war between Iran and Iraq when initially the borders were closed and then few chose to make the journey home. It was due to these combined events that Neshat's temporary move for her education became permanent, and she was left in the U.S. without family, as her older siblings had already moved back to Iran.

At U.C. Berkeley, Neshat trained as a painter, receiving her B.A. (1979), M.A. (1981), and M.F.A. from the Department of Art Practice, but she was “never a good student, never a highlight.”¹⁴ “I thought I was a really bad painter, and as an Iranian artist attending a Western school, I felt I had nothing to contribute. I would have done mediocre work, half-Iranian, half-Western — very typical of artists from another culture living in the U.S. who feel the pressure to create a middle space.”¹⁵ She felt that her ideas were “confused and simply not strong enough” to pursue in the intimidating contemporary art scene of New York City.¹⁶

When she did return to visit Iran, the experience was both “frightening and exciting,” “fascinat[ing] and terrif[ying].”¹⁷ As Neshat describes it, “I had never been in a country that was so ideologically based. Most noticeable of course was the change in people's physical appearance and public behavior. It was a strange adjustment for me as I too had to put on the veil and behave like a good Muslim.”¹⁸ The changes, moreover, were not merely superficial and public, for “[m]y own family had taken a big toll, as they had experienced a huge decline in their social and economic status, were cut off from all past luxuries, and had to modify their lifestyle to meet the expectations of Islamic codes. This experience really shook me up. When I came back to the United States, I became obsessed with this experience and started to travel to Iran regularly.”¹⁹ Indeed, when back in Iran, Neshat, who had not played part with her peers in the student radicalism of the early seventies, found herself activated by the energy and impulse — if not entirely by the outcome — of the revolution that she herself had not actually experienced, envious of those who had lived through it and the succeeding “twelve years of nightmare”²⁰:

I have to say I became very attracted to what they had gone through. When I looked at myself, at what I had gone through, it seemed I had spent my life without commitment. There was this need to be attracted by something other than my own reality. Something that could change me, wake me up.... [I would

¹³ MacDonald, 325. The Dominican College of San Rafael changed status in 2000 to become the Dominican University of California.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Birbragher, 90.

¹⁶ MacDonald, 325.

¹⁷ Bertucci, 86, and MacDonald, 327, respectively.

¹⁸ Bertucci, 86-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ Mackenzie, 22.

think], I am from here. I look like everybody else. I haven't experienced anything of what they have gone through, but I belong here... I felt I would have been a better person had I stayed.²¹

The trip was transformative for many reasons; in terms of her art, it gave her focus.

The return trip gave Neshat focus, but she had never truly stopped making art after receiving her M.F.A. and moving from the West Coast to New York City, even making a brief appearance in *The New York Times* as early as 1986 for an installation displayed in a vitrine at 480 Broome Street in SoHo. Consisting of two paintings, each paired with a still-life sculpture, *Voices of Silence*'s juxtaposition of the themes of poverty and plenty — “a real bowl of fruit sit[ting] under the painting of ‘plenty’; a bowl of rocks and glass under the one portraying poverty” — was assessed in the *Times* as “high-minded,” its form “insipidly executed.”²² While far from glowing, the *Times*' review demonstrates that not long after her cross-country move, Neshat was already revising her artistic methodology, moving away from an emphasis on painting and toward a more multimedia and sculptural approach.

In an unpublished 1992 résumé, submitted along with her proposal to Franklin Furnace, Neshat documented a brief list of exhibitions in which she had participated — at least one each year between 1985 and the 1993 solo show. During that period, Neshat showed work in exhibitions at Storefront for Art and Architecture (in 1986 and 1987, just prior to making the directorial staff there), as well as at a smattering of small-scale and lesser-known venues. Information concerning these exhibitions and the artworks Neshat produced for them is scant, but a glance at some of their titles might hint at Neshat's broader interests in the period: *Homeless at Home* (1986, Storefront for Art and Architecture), *Liberty* (1986, Sixth Sense Gallery), *History* (1986, Minor Injury Gallery), *Unity* (1988, Goddard Art Center, New York City), and *Public Mirror: Artists Against Racial Prejudice* (1990, Clock Tower Gallery, New York City). Issues of home, history, race and racism, all came up in Neshat's “pre-artistic” repertoire, linking this elusive early period thematically to the one well known today.²³

According to her résumé, Neshat's career progressed at a slow, but constant pace, her reputation steadily growing after her unfavorable *New York Times* review. She was awarded a Sponsored Project Grant from the New York State Council on the Arts in 1989, and served as an Artist-in-Residence in 1991-1992 at the Henry Street Settlement in New York City. Around this time, she also participated in independent curatorial activities, guest editing an issue of the now defunct New York-based non-profit arts magazine, *New Observations*, in 1988, and helping to assemble an exhibition in 1989 at Minor Injury Gallery called *Homeland: A Palestinian Quest*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Grace Glueck, “Through a Glass Brightly: Artists' Creations Abound in City's Windows,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1986, C.1.

²³ According to another unpublished résumé, circa 1990, in the archive at Exit Art in New York City, other exhibitions Neshat participated in early in her career include “New York Asian Artists” in 1985 at A Gallery, and “Peripheral Visions” in 1990 at the Brecht Forum, both in New York City.

While still at the cusp of her up-and-coming artistic career, Neshat was promoting awareness of her ongoing efforts as a working artist — offering up, in a review following the show at Franklin Furnace, a telephone number where interested parties could reach her to inquire about her “regular” exhibition schedule in New York, or her “artistic success in her homeland” — such accounting would soon change.²⁴ Though the two aforementioned early awards continue to be cited in catalogues of her art, those exhibitions in which Neshat participated between 1985 and 1993 have never been listed in any of the now numerous, comprehensive catalogues of her art. As early as 1997, the two earliest book-length publications dedicated to the artist’s work were documenting the 1993 Franklin Furnace show as Neshat’s first — solidifying the originary role of the artist’s return visit home as the decisive starting point of her career — and it has remained so ever since.²⁵

OPENINGS AND CLOSURES, RUPTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS

What matters about such an accounting — or lack of it, as it were — is not why those preparing the first publications on Neshat’s art neglected to document her earliest artistic endeavors, or why Neshat herself credits her artistic awakening to her 1990 visit home (“That trip ... made me want to do art, something I had stopped doing since Berkeley.”²⁶ “My first artistic work was a body of photographs, called ‘Women of Allah’”²⁷). Instead, what matters is the effect of such accounting on critical understandings of Neshat’s art. What is at stake in situating Neshat’s practice, as well as her artistic persona and personal identity, as entirely dependent on her return visit to a post-Revolutionary Iran?

This accounting has had repercussions on critical interpretations of Neshat’s art, isolating the impact of her encounter with the Islamic Republic at the expense of other factors and histories relevant to her artistic production and its understanding. Although the experience was undeniably pivotal for Neshat in many ways, its exclusive centrality in the art criticism has helped to support an all too tidy originary myth of Neshat-the-artist as borne, fully formed no less, out of her return visit to Iran, with enough ideas suddenly generated to fill a solo show at Franklin Furnace. Such an origin story links Neshat’s personal identity with her artistic trajectory, placing both, moreover, on a path akin to the political path of her country: “[i]t seems obvious now that what was happening to [Neshat] paralleled what had happened in her country under the Shah. The collapse of her identity into another’s — the west’s.”²⁸ Thus, prior to her own personal revolution, Neshat, like her country, was utterly, or at least problematically, westernized, and therefore lost. Only through the Islamic Revolution could Neshat, like her country,

²⁴ Kate Bobby, “Exploring the Secrets of the Veil,” *New Directions for WOMEN* 22, no. 4 (July-August 1993): 34.

²⁵ *Shirin Neshat: “Women of Allah”* (Vancouver, BC: Artspeak Gallery, 1997), 30-31; and *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* (Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1997), n.p.

²⁶ Tenaglia, 97.

²⁷ MacDonald, 326.

²⁸ Mackenzie, 22.

claim her independent sense of self, and effect a rupture with the vacuous (“westoxicated”) past. And so, finally, Neshat emerged from post-revolutionary Iran galvanized, reborn and, like her country, charged with a new sense of purpose and ambition.²⁹

Powerful though it is, this narrative — bent on romanticized notions of rupture, transformation, revolution and rebirth — feeds an epistemological closure in the understanding of Neshat’s art, allowing it only to speak to the condition of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran or, as if such a project were possible, to that of Muslim women as a whole. “Shirin Neshat ... faithfully capture[s] the plight of everyday women in her native Iran. It is a window that offers a troublesome view.”³⁰ “Although Shirin Neshat lives and works in the United States, her artwork explores issues of her native Islamic society, especially the position of women.”³¹ While this epistemological closure might in fact be crucial to understanding Neshat’s art — it has, at any rate, dominated in the discourse — it forms only part of the story. For although Neshat’s art depends on the account of rupture so too does it rely on notions of continuities, links, bonds and relationships — continuities that unite and bring into dialogue viewer and artwork, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, and religious and secular Iranians. The implications of such continuities and relationships are significant and far-reaching, making important proposals about history as registered in intersubjective embodiment and about dialogue across national, political, religious and cultural borders. Considering some of these continuities, the remaining portions of this chapter trace Neshat’s early artistic trajectory backwards in time — from her solo show at Franklin Furnace Gallery in 1993 to a watercolor and ink drawing the artist produced in 1988 for the visual art journal *New Observations* — analyzing works that until now have been given no extended discussion in previous treatments of Neshat’s art. Thus, demythologizing the account of Neshat’s artistic birth — revealing Neshat’s sustained and continuous art practice through the 1980s and 1990s — this chapter conducts an archaeology of origins, contextualizing Neshat’s early artistic production in New York City, situating its responses to particular visual, artistic and political currents within both the United States and Iran.

²⁹ For another accounting that treats Neshat’s practice and identity explicitly in terms of rupture and rebirth, see also Marcello Dantas, “Entre Extremos/Between Extremes”: “The trajectory of Shirin Neshat begins with her departure from Iran in 1974... After five years in the United States, Shirin graduates and Iran suffers its notorious Shiite Revolution of the Aiatollah Khomeini. In face of such historical change, the first great rupture takes place in her life... For several reasons she also abandons her artistic production... Only when the Iranian government begins a gradual liberalization process in the early 90s that Shirin Neshat is allowed to visit her native land. It is exactly in this moment that the artist within Shirin is reborn...” (in *Shirin Neshat: Entre Extremos* [Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural de Banco do Brasil, 2002], 14-15).

³⁰ Tenaglia, 96.

³¹ *Carnegie International 1999/2000*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, exhibition brochure.

NESHAT AT FRANKLIN FURNACE GALLERY & EXIT ART

FRANKLIN FURNACE, 1993

Unveiling at Franklin Furnace itself represents continuities in Neshat's career; for, while the exhibition may have displayed her turn to the subject of Iranian women in the *chador*, one relatively new to her art, it nonetheless also continued to employ the multimedia and installational approach she had already established upon moving to New York City, recalling, for instance, the 1986 *Voices of Silence* installation dismissed in *The New York Times*. However, whereas the earlier artwork stood apart from the viewer behind a glass vitrine, pairing each of its two paintings with a bowl — one filled with rocks and glass, the other, with fruit — *Unveiling* took those rocks so neatly contained in *Voices of Silence*, projected super-8 film onto their jagged, uneven surfaces, and spilled them directly onto the gallery floor where the viewer would have to negotiate their boundaries [fig. 5].

This latter, untitled floor installation was just one component of *Unveiling*, which included two other sculptural works and at least nineteen black and white photographs — three of which would soon come to comprise the earliest examples of the *Women of Allah* series. Neshat's written documents in anticipation of the Franklin Furnace Gallery show, however, made few references to the projected inclusion of photography in the exhibition, emphasizing instead the show's sculptural components with detailed proposals and drawings. One such proposal outlined an ambitious installation called *Stoned Carpet* that was to cover the gallery floor with bricks, rather than with the stones of their title, sandblasted with patterns evocative of "traditional carpet design" as well as with words in English and Persian.³² In constructing a Persian carpet with solid, unyielding brick, Neshat aimed at once to address "stereotypical views of Persian/Iranian culture, which is typically portrayed by its traditional arts and crafts," and the "harshness of current political and cultural reality [*sic*] of Iran."³³ Ultimately left unrealized, *Stoned Carpet* was replaced with the more manageable (and more financially feasible, given the show's \$1000 honorarium) collection of stones and super-8 installation mentioned above.

Another unrealized sculpture, *Hands of Prayers*, called for bricks to be laid on the gallery floor in a formation resembling a pair of palms held together and opened into the Islamic prayer position. These bricks were to be sandblasted with words as well — in this case identified as a poem on the subject of "human vulnerability and our need of spiritual escape" — written in Persian on one palm, and translated into English on the other.³⁴ As with *Stoned Carpet*, *Hands of Prayers* was replaced with another, somewhat related sculpture — an 8 foot tall by 5 foot wide cut-out of sheet metal in the shape of a single hand, displayed with a video projection of an eye at its center [fig. 6]. A well-known motif in Islamic iconography intended to ward off the evil eye, the Hand of Fatimah is typically reproduced on a smaller scale, often either as an amulet or a wall-hanging for the home. Referencing the daughter of Muhammad, "one of the only female saints in the

³² Shirin Neshat, "Proposal #2: STONED CARPET," n.d., Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Shirin Neshat, "Proposal #1: HANDS OF PRAYERS," n.d., Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives.

history of Islam,”³⁵ the large-scale Hand of Fatimah in Neshat’s exhibition was supposed to indicate the “irony” of the situation of women in the Islamic Republic, where the “popularity of this symbol inadvertently [*sic*] grants widespread status to women” in a culture widely recognized as patriarchal.³⁶

According to Neshat’s “General Statement” for Franklin Furnace, written prior to the realization of any of the artworks in *Unveiling*, the emphasis on rocks and stones in her art “had several metaphorical significances,” including “Permanency-Endurance [*sic*]” and “Stone as a symbol of Spirit.”³⁷ Stones, in the first case, provided a metaphor for the persistence of the “human spirit and its resistance to all human destructions and sins.”³⁸ In the second case, stones served as a reference — to the Kaaba in Mecca, the house of worship built out of stones from the surrounding hills, and to the “*Mohr*”, the “praying stone” used in daily prayer — to Islam, wherein they have “spiritual and religious” value, mediating between the human and the divine.³⁹ Thus, in Neshat’s iconography, stones could effectively symbolize such abstract values as humanity, constancy, and religious faith. However, at the close of her description, Neshat appended, almost as an afterthought, a relevant material, rather than metaphorical, use for stones: “Also,” she wrote, “stones which are essentially the main component of Islamic countries landscape [*sic*], have traditionally been used as weapons.”⁴⁰

From prayer to landscape, and from landscape to weapon. In its swift shift from the general and generalizing, but relatively innocuous, to the destructive, Neshat’s statement captures the gist of her sculptural installations exhibited in the Franklin Furnace galleries. All three of the installations — not only the untitled collection of stones on the gallery floor, but also the large, sheet-metal Hand of Fatimah and a third installation consisting of a glass vitrine displaying several smaller cut metal hands encircled by rocks — conjured just such a stereotypical Islamic terrain, doing so in ways that were far from neutral.

In the untitled floor installation, the super-8 film projected onto the stones the image of a reclining nude woman [fig. 5]. Her form and movements impaired due to the stones’ rough and uneven topography, the woman would have appeared trapped within and upon their surface — an entrapment underscored not only by the three successive layers of stones, but also by the schematic arrangement of their central layer into the shape of a chador, with a circular patch of smaller stones towards the top to indicate the opening for the face. Thus, stones, that “main component of Islamic countries landscape,” were the very substance containing the woman within their boundaries, their hard

³⁵ Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives. The quotation is taken from an untitled and unattributed exhibition summary that I suspect was written by Neshat herself (due to distinctive turns of phrase as well as grammatical errors and spelling mistakes repeated elsewhere in her proposal), and then used a point of reference for the author of *Unveiling*’s Press Release (Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives).

³⁶ *Unveiling* Press Release, dated March 22, 1993, Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives.

³⁷ Shirin Neshat, “General Statement,” dated March 31, 1992, Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

materiality juxtaposed to her fragile, spectral condition. Moreover, the combination of the pile of rocks with the image of a woman's body surely also evoked, at least to some viewers, stoning as a form of punishment — with the careful tomb-like arrangement of the stones on the gallery floor indicating a figure buried alive, writhing in the throes of death.⁴¹ Violence and imprisonment are in the very fiber of Islam's dry and barren earth, in the woman's stony bed of religion, the sculpture seemed to say.⁴²

The cut metal sculpture using the motif of the Hand of Fatimah generated a similar effect of containment, enclosing the “living”, blinking female eye within the boundaries of the sculpture's hard, cold and immobile surface. In both of these sculptures, Neshat wrote, “by overlaying living bodyparts on to lifeless elements, the artist attempts to suggest seeking signs of life within a non living existence.”⁴³ The nonliving existence in each sculpture — the bed of stones, the cut metal hand — acts a metaphor for Islam — the obdurate and unyielding (lifeless and inhuman) surfaces standing as severe counterparts to the tenuously present “signs of life” in the light of the super-8 projections. Islam supports life, these sculptures claimed, but a life it renders transparent, deathly and potentially disembodied, like the eye at the center of the Hand of Fatimah.

Thus, in spite of the statements in Neshat's application that the “intention of this exhibition... is not oriented toward criticism or analyzing a culture or a religion,” but rather toward an inquiry into the “dichotomy between the life of women on the outside and behind of a veil” — the dichotomy, that is, between a veiled woman's “self-image” and her “public identity” — the sculptural objects in *Unveiling* projected relatively unambiguous critiques of Islam's oppressive stance towards women;⁴⁴ in the *Unveiling* installations, woman was strictly the victim, and Islam the perpetrator. At the same time, while *Unveiling*'s installations offered this straightforward critique, their target, “Islam,”

⁴¹ The Islamic Penal Code ratified stoning in Iran in 1983, as a penalty for committing adultery, the offending woman is buried in a standing position up to the shoulders, her arms pinioned at her sides. (Men, by contrast, are buried up to their waists.) See Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, eds., “Appendix II: The Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran: excerpts relating to women,” in *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 183.

⁴² The reference to stoning was also present linguistically in the unrealized version of the installation under discussion. Whereas the title *Stone Carpet* might suggest a static feature inherent in the carpet's materiality, *Stoned Carpet* implies an action, development or transformation: either the carpet's subjection to the violent act of lapidation, or its metamorphosis from the malleable material of silk to the rigid and inflexible one of stone. (Neshat alternated between spellings in her Franklin Furnace application.) In each case, the suggestion is that Islam perverted not only what had been traditional, but also what had been supple and pliant, in Iranian culture, leaving behind a rough and hardened body bearing only a superficial resemblance to what it had once been. The realized sculpture made a claim similar to *Stoned Carpet*, while shifting its topic to the more sensational territory of gender within Islam.

⁴³ Although written in the third person, this statement appears to have been authored by Neshat herself (see footnote 69 above for clarification). Quotation from the same untitled and unattributed exhibition summary, in the Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives, cited earlier in this chapter and referenced in footnote 69.

⁴⁴ Ibid. and *Unveiling* Press Release, respectively (Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives).

remained broad and undefined — homogenous, monolithic, uncontingent and uniformly oppressive — too much so to carry any lasting, meaningful weight in an aesthetic climate privileging critical sophistication and complexity.

Consider, for example, Fred Wilson's well-known work of institutional critique, *Mining the Museum*, also of 1992, consisting of an excavation into the archive of the Maryland Historical Society and a reshuffling of its collection to highlight the history of race, slavery and racial prejudice in the state of Maryland.⁴⁵ In such displays as *Metalwork, 1723-1880*, the seemingly incompatible juxtaposition in an exhibition case of iron shackles alongside an elaborate silver tea service forced viewers to put together the relation between the two sets of objects — the fact that the same well-to-do, white Marylanders who owned the tea service also owned the slaves who prepared their tea and polished the silver [fig. 7]. Wilson's intervention into the Historical Society's holdings thus exhumed histories long kept underground, as well as exposed the role of the institution itself in shaping (or hiding) those histories, demanding ultimately that viewers assume a more active position in interpreting their own histories and the forms in which information is presented to them.

Or, to raise a potentially more relevant comparison, consider some of Mona Hatoum's roughly contemporaneous artworks, such as *Corps Étranger* (1994) or *Present Tense* (1996). Although today Hatoum and Neshat are often mentioned in the same breath, the comparison is typically due more to ostensible convergences in their biographies and to their success as artists from the Islamic world working in the West, than to any significant parallels in their artistic output.⁴⁶ As does Wilson's art, both Hatoum's and Neshat's work of this moment evidence a debt to the Minimalist destabilization of the autonomy of the art object and its emphasis instead on relationships between the space, the object and the viewer. However, whereas Wilson's and Hatoum's revisions of Minimalist forms and concepts carried out the implications of their emphases on the gallery space and the viewer's bodily encounter with the work of art — deneutralizing the gallery institution and undermining the earlier movement's assumption of a heteronormative, white male viewpoint — Neshat's sculptural installations in *Unveiling* lacked such critical complexity.

Nonetheless, some of Hatoum's artworks of the nineties bear superficial similarities with Neshat's installations at Franklin Furnace, reflecting the artists' shared art-historical pedigree. Hatoum's *Present Tense* [fig. 8], consisting of 1,764 blocks of soap — handmade in the Palestinian territories using olive oil from the region — recalls Neshat's installation with rocks and super-8 projection, both carefully arranged on the gallery floor and invoking tenuous bodily presence, though *Present Tense*'s tidy, square composition more readily suggests Carl Andre's precedent [fig. 9]. However, whereas Andre's *144 Magnesium Squares* (1969) represents a shift away from the modernist

⁴⁵ Lisa G. Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* (Baltimore: The Contemporary; New York: The New Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Hatoum, born in 1952 to Palestinian parents in Beirut, was in art school in London when civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, leaving her exiled at the age of twenty-three (Michael Archer, "Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum," in *Mona Hatoum* [London: Phaidon Press, 1997], 8).

attention on the inner formal constitution of the artwork, surface incident and internal relationships remain crucial to *Present Tense*. Thus, the small beads pressed into the soaps' surface in Hatoum's installation form the boundaries of a map revealing the first phase of Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as agreed upon in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Conjuring the disquieting human "presence" Michael Fried famously abhorred in the Minimalist art object, like the ghostly projection in Neshat's installation, the beads invoke bodies and their traces — the bodies making the soap, the bodies living, and the bodies lost in the conflict-ridden territory — with the beads' blood red color representing their fleeting but vital pulse. Hatoum's map is thus animated by the individuals it indexes, while the vulnerability of that animation is always sustained by the prospect of the soaps' dissolution — their presence is tense and temporary, as is their present. That the soaps give off a distinct aroma — one recognizable to those from the region⁴⁷ — makes viewers' perception of *Present Tense* olfactory, as well as visual and ambulatory, and renders the sense of the soaps' fragile temporality even more stirring, like the lingering, familiar scent on the shirt of a deceased loved one. The bodies indexed, like the aroma, can quickly fade away. At the same time, the soaps' dissolution implies also the dissolution of the borders of the map — the dissolution of the lines "dividing and controlling the area"; thus *Present Tense* offers a complex, dual proposal whose implications are horrifying, linking the hopeful with the devastating.⁴⁸

Although the viewer of both *Present Tense* and *Unveiling*'s floor installation stands upright next to a horizontal artwork occupying the space of the gallery floor, the relationship each artwork provokes with the viewer is distinct. In the *Unveiling* installation, the body on the stones — projected, reclining, writhing — calls attention to the viewer's opposed status — his stable, privileged verticality against the nude woman's debased and abjected stance, while the nude's ontological condition as immaterial, optical circumstance, contrasts with the viewer's fleshly materiality. In the case of *Present Tense*, the tactile quality of the soaps — each slightly imperfect cube sharing qualities with, but also distinct from, the next — allegorizes the particularity of the human individuals involved in their making. Moreover, through its use of bars of soap — familiar, household items that we bring into contact with our own skin — *Present Tense* invites the viewer to imagine a close, affective intimacy with the installation and the context to which it refers.

In Hatoum's *Corps Étranger*, a single eye — as well as other bodily organs and orifices — gazes out at the viewer from a circular screen on the gallery's floor, housed in a white, wooden cylindrical structure [figs. 10 and 11]. Observing the video on the screen, an endoscopic exploration of Hatoum's own body, the viewer is taken on a disorienting journey of the surface and interior of that body's magnified parts. In contrast to Neshat's installation of the Hand of Fatimah, in which the projection of the female eye appears contained within the metal surface of the sculpture, *Corps Étranger* forms several enclosures around the viewer. The viewer who opts to stand upon the screen in Hatoum's work, rather than beside it, is in fact doubly enclosed, standing as though

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸ Archer, 27. Hatoum continues on to state, "[a]t the first sign of trouble Israel practices the policy of 'closure'; they close all the passages between the areas so the Arabs are completely isolated and paralyzed" (ibid.).

within the enlarged orifice depicted on the screen, as well as within the installation's architectural frame. Thus, the installation's title refers to the bodies documented in the artwork — to Hatoum's body, strange and foreign in her adoptive home; to the female body more broadly, in its abject and threatening deviance; and to 'the body' in general, its interior strange and foreign to us all. But the title also refers to the foreign body that is the impersonal (and depersonalizing) camera of the medical establishment, analogous here to the viewer's body and gaze, invading the depths of the body on the screen. In consequence, the viewer's body at once performs the invasion and is the one disorientated and unsettled by it, as his or her body becomes enveloped and consumed by the monstrosity large bodily fragment on the screen. Thus *Corps Étranger* cleverly engages complicated discourses of gender, migration, colonization, and xenophobia, while forcing the viewer to consider his own stance on these issues.

That *Corps Étranger*, like *Present Tense*, calls upon and appropriates Minimalist formal precedent — in this case Robert Morris' *Untitled*, 1966 [fig. 12] — reflects the artist's emergence out of an aesthetic field actively seeking to rethink the earlier movement's assumptions of a gallery space and body still considered neutral. In Hatoum's installations, the institution is scopic, medical, male, and so on, while the body is gendered, raced, and politicized, addressing particular social, historical and political circumstances and demanding that the viewer work through their complex and ambivalent proposals. Neshat's installations in *Unveiling* were, by comparison, straightforward and sweeping in their critique, homing in on Islam and the Muslim female experience while engaging little with any of the specific complexities or manifold heterogeneities of those terms.

Not so the nineteen photographs exhibited in *Unveiling*: if the installations in the exhibition were messy and unpolished in both form and content, the black and white photographs were sleek and refined, their message provocative and ambivalent at the same time as they related to the particular topic of Iran's Islamic Revolution and urban Iranian women's bodies [figs. 13 and 14]. While it is tempting to regard the photographs as a late addendum to the exhibition, or as having initially been considered secondary to the sculptures, by the time *Unveiling* was installed, it was the photographs that acted as the exhibition's public "face", with a poster reproduction of one of the photographs hanging streetside on the Franklin Furnace building to entice passersby to come in and made available for visitors to take home [fig. 15].⁴⁹ Ultimately it was the photographs that would gain exposure and fascinate Neshat's audience, quickly propelling the artist towards international acclaim.

The photographs visible in the installation shot at Franklin Furnace are fascinating both in their own right and for what they help to illuminate about Neshat's imminent practice. Neshat was, after all, still fleshing out her ideas at this stage in her artistic formation — there was not yet any truly cohesive theme in her practice — and evident

⁴⁹ Not only did Neshat hardly mention the photographs in her application materials, but the exhibition's press release also referred specifically only the sculptures. That Neshat might initially have privileged the sculptures in her application makes sense: up until the early 1990s and the period of the Franklin Furnace show, Neshat had been trying to make it as a sculptor and installation artist, and had not yet focused on work in photography.

work was done both to alter as well as to consolidate and expand the body of photographs following *Unveiling*'s success. Only three of the photographs in *Unveiling* would ultimately survive the exhibition — those now typically understood as forming the first photographs of the *Women of Allah* series — while the other sixteen photographs have effectively disappeared from view.⁵⁰

Of these latter photographs, twelve represent pairs of limbs — the artist's hands or feet — set against an all-black background, with most, if not all, including Persian script in varied patterns written upon the photographs but appearing as though directly upon the figure's skin. These photographs are characterized by their generally straightforward, frontal compositions, and by dramatic spotlighting that theatricalizes their subjects as well as starkly affirms the body's corporeality — its physicality and three-dimensionality within the two-dimensional medium.

In one photograph of a pair of palms (fourth from the left in the installation image, fig. 13), the play of light and shadow accentuating the curvature of figure's hands and wrists causes them to appear at once chiseled and modeled, yet still vulnerably fleshly. The figure's palms opened in the Islamic prayer position, the photograph recalls *Hands of Prayer*, one of the unrealized sculptures described by Neshat in her application. Indeed, Neshat treated the body in all of the photographs in the exhibition as she had intended to treat her sculptures, with Persian script inscribed onto their surfaces. Thus, although Neshat would cease to make sculpture following *Unveiling*, the medium would remain an implicit facet of her two-dimensional work: "There are many reasons [I have chosen photography as a means of representation] but generally speaking," Neshat explains, "I approach photography like one would approach sculpting. I am interested in constructing images, carving monuments."⁵¹ The body in Neshat's photographs, and later on in her video installations, would always be treated as a sculptural thing — dense and material, and firmly of its world — but always unstably so, with the effect and implications of that treatment startling and unexpected.

While I will pursue the implications of Neshat's investment in the sculptural later in this chapter, I now turn to the other photographs in *Unveiling* — the seven photographs that revealed those parts of the woman's body other than her limbs and including, usually, her face. Three of these, as already mentioned, made it into the *Women of Allah* series, while the remaining four did not. What set the photographs subsequently titled *I Am Its Secret*, "*Unveiling*," and *Offered Eyes* apart from these other four photographs in the exhibition [figs. 1, 15, 16]?⁵² In what respects did these latter rejected photographs fail to meet the standards later deemed significant to the *Women of Allah* series?

⁵⁰ To my knowledge, none of these remaining sixteen photographs were ever exhibited again, and it is unclear where they ended up. The Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives contains three photographic slides of installation views of *Unveiling* showing the photographs (see figs. 13 and 14; the third installation shot is a close up of the two photographs shown at far right in fig. 14). The Exit Art Archives includes photographic slides of three of the photographs shown in *Unveiling* (figs. 16, 17, and 18).

⁵¹ Bertucci, 84.

⁵² Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to the photograph, *Unveiling*, as "*Unveiling*" (in quotation marks), in order to distinguish it from Neshat's exhibition at Franklin Furnace Gallery. Although there are reproductions of the earliest versions of *Offered Eyes* and "*Unveiling*" in the

The most conspicuous feature distinguishing *I Am Its Secret*, *Offered Eyes*, and “*Unveiling*” from nearly all of the other photographs in the exhibition is not simply that in these three photographs Neshat reveals her face (or partial face in the case of *Offered Eyes*), but also that in them her gaze meets the viewer’s straight on in a steady, cool stare. In so doing, Neshat’s photographs invoke a host of art-historical and visual-cultural imagery — Delacroix’s 1834 painting, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, will come up in the following chapter, as will some examples of early 20th-century French colonial postcards — as well as more recent feminist theories concerning the gaze and normative masculinist economies of female representation, while calling attention to the role of the viewing subject in the aesthetic encounter.⁵³ In this latter respect, Neshat’s three photographs evidence their derivation from Minimalist influence — far more directly than did any of her sculptures at Franklin Furnace — particularly as described by Michael Fried in his famous formulations on Minimalist Art (or, “literalist art,” as he called it), in the 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood.”⁵⁴

In that essay, Fried takes issue with the heightened sense precipitated by Minimalist art of the art-viewing encounter as a “situation” exceeding the object itself and encompassing the viewer.⁵⁵ Whereas the modernist art Fried privileges is autonomous — displaying internal coherence, and therefore existing as though self-contained and producing a self-forgetful beholder — Minimalist objects, bereft of much formal incident, take “relationships out of the work,” writes Fried, quoting the words of Robert Morris, making them instead “a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision.”⁵⁶ Thus, Minimalist artworks readily treat the viewer as though he is there, bringing him into the formal equation and making him all too self-aware in his encounter with the art object. In this acknowledgement of, and even emphasis on, the viewer, Fried argues, Minimalist art is “theatrical,” for, unlike the other arts, theatre “*exists for*” an audience.⁵⁷

Neshat’s photographs might therefore be understood as theatrical not only as a result of the dramatic effects of lighting adopted in the images, but in Fried’s sense as well, as the return gazes of the women photographed seem explicitly and purposefully to engage the viewer. For Fried, moreover, what is particularly unsettling about Minimalism’s theatricality is its quality of “presence” — a quality that serves to distance the viewer not merely physically but also “psychically,” “extort[ing]” from him a

Franklin Furnace Gallery and Exit Art Archives, the Franklin Furnace version of *I Am its Secret* is only available in the black and white installation image. For reference, figure 1 reproduces the version printed in the 1997 *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* Turin publication, though this version of the artwork surely looks different than it did in 1993; for one thing, the handwritten script is likely more refined and carefully rendered than it had been at Franklin Furnace, as comparison with other photographs in the show suggests.

⁵³ See, for example, Laura Mulvey’s foundational essay on the sexual politics of looking, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

⁵⁴ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

“special complicity.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, Fried claims, this presence behaves like “the silent presence of another *person*” — a statement that Neshat’s photographs literalize, explicitly staging that silent, human presence for the viewer.⁵⁹ (Indeed, in one of Neshat’s Franklin Furnace photographs, the figure stands tall and erect upon a stage or a plinth of sorts — like a performer, or perhaps rather a statue — as though the “latent or hidden” anthropomorphism Fried sensed within the hollow interior of Tony Smith’s *Die* emerged from its container to reveal a female figure wearing a chador [fig. 17].⁶⁰) In both cases, what makes the encounter so disconcerting is just that uncanny silence of the artwork — what Alex Potts has referred to as Minimalism’s “insistent blankness”⁶¹ — producing “an indeterminate, open-ended — and unexacting — relationship” between the beholder and the “impassive” object that confronts him.⁶²

Thus, although Fried’s essay refers to abstract sculpture, and Neshat’s photographs are two-dimensional and explicitly figurative, Fried’s descriptions of Minimalist art remain useful in the approach to Neshat’s photographs. Similarly, though Neshat’s photographs feature complex and provocative internal incident, the world they depict is everything but hermetic. Not clearly governed by any logic or necessity described within the frame, Neshat’s photographs — all tightly cropped and eliminating most of the figures’ setting — and in particular those three in which the woman looks out from the artwork, reach out to the world of the viewer through the figures’ direct gaze. In their spare, black and white aesthetic, in their confrontational and seemingly oppositional stance, in their theatricality and sculptural staging, demanding that the viewer contend with and negotiate their presence as he would another human, Neshat’s photographs reach back to and cite Minimalist precedent as described by Fried. Whereas the “situation” explored by Neshat’s photographs has less to do with the circumstances of their setting than with the viewer’s approach — his or her frames of reference, histories, senses and forms of knowledge — in both examples, the artwork “remain[s] the center or focus of the situation” even as “the situation itself *belongs* to the beholder—it is *his* situation.”⁶³ Fried links this aspect of Minimalist art to its theatricality, but specifies that the audience of Minimalist art is an “audience of one” — the viewer experiences the Minimalist situation as though it “exists for him *alone*, even if he is not actually alone with the work at the time.” Minimalist art thus, “*depends* on the beholder, [it] is

⁵⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 128, italics in the original.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 129. Fried’s description of Smith’s *Black Box* is also relevant here: “One way of describing what Smith *was* making might be something like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of *statue*. (This reading finds support in the caption to a photograph of another of Smith’s pieces, *The Black Box*, published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, in which Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., presumably with the artist’s sanction, observed, ‘One can see the two-by-fours under the piece, which keep it from appearing like architecture or a monument, and set it off as sculpture.’ The two-by-fours are, in effect, a rudimentary *pedestal*, and thereby reinforce the statue-like quality of the piece)” (ibid., 128).

⁶¹ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 194.

⁶² Fried, 128.

⁶³ Ibid., 127, italics in the original.

incomplete without him.”⁶⁴ Such a situation, I believe, is created in the confrontation with those three photographs at Franklin Furnace, when the figure’s eyes lock gazes with the viewer, and the two become involved in an “indeterminate,” reciprocal act of looking. In that moment, meeting the figure’s gaze, it is difficult not to feel as though she is there to look at *you* — you specifically and you alone.⁶⁵

This sensation derives from the figure’s “presence” in these photographs — from the way in which her eyes register as conscious and sentient, and her face as a surface for her psychic interiority — a sensation certainly abetted by photography’s *effet du réel*. According to Barthes, in photography, “the referent adheres,” indicating the way in which a photograph is “never... or at least... not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent.”⁶⁶ When looking at a photograph (as when looking at other forms of representation), we tend to elide the distinction between the photographic signifier and its referent, an elision betrayed in the rhetorical slippage of our descriptions — when, to use Barthes’ example, we refer to a photograph of a pipe simply as “a pipe”. Thus, there are moments of concentrated looking into the eyes of the figures in Neshat’s photograph — for instance the one that eventually accrued the exhibition’s title [fig. 15] — when the materiality of the photographic surface fades from view, and it seems that what we are looking at is a subject who is alive, existing in our own space rather than in a sphere apart; in these moments of deep immersion into the representation, the figure appears to belong to our literal reality, possessing the requisite characteristics of another, conscious human subject.⁶⁷

And yet, as the following chapter will argue, presence is only tenuously sustained in Neshat’s photographs. Particularly following the artist’s revisions of her photographs for the *Women of Allah* series, the works’ emphasis on surface — whether by the Persian script, or by the representation itself — always threatens to undermine presence.⁶⁸ Just as presence is both conjured and denied in these photographs, so too is their theatricality. For the photographs’ ability to persuade us that they offer transparent depictions of how the world and the women truly look and are suspends awareness of their staged and performative aspects. This *is* a Muslim woman (or a contemporary Iranian Muslim woman, to viewers attuned to the pictures’ particular representational and textual codes), the photographs seem to propose, rather than a photograph of the artist performing as an Iranian Muslim woman. From this point of view, the photographs appear documentary,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 140, italics in the original.

⁶⁵ The significance of the works’ contingent encounter with the viewer was underscored by the original title, “*Face to Face*,” that Neshat proposed for her Franklin Furnace Gallery show in her application (Franklin Furnace Gallery Archives, folder “Documentation”).

⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6 and 5 respectively, italics in the original.

⁶⁷ Indeed, Barthes writes, “... [though] it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier... it requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection” (ibid., 5).

⁶⁸ Although I would argue that some of the photographs in the Franklin Furnace exhibition also deny presence through these features, I postpone this discussion to the next chapter as it is more pertinent to Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series, which demonstrates the artist’s refinement of these aspects of her photographs.

rather than theatrical.⁶⁹ Ultimately, however, it is the dialectic between the theatrical and the documentary, as well as between the figures' animate presence and inert blankness, that defines the *Women of Allah* photographs.⁷⁰

I have just described some of the modalities — the tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies — of the *Women of Allah* photographs — modalities, however, still unrefined at Franklin Furnace. At the time of the *Unveiling* exhibition, Neshat was still testing and experimenting with the possibilities of her newfound aesthetic, and her photographs did not yet display the kinds of complex convolutions that would later give them their density and force. Presence and theatricality tended to be steadily sustained in the Franklin Furnace photographs, including in the early versions of those that would come to be called “*Unveiling*”, *I am its Secret*, and *Offered Eyes* — largely a result of the dramatic illumination and shading in the images. These features, however, would eventually be amended, eliminated, and revised when the artist edited the Franklin Furnace ensemble in order to construct the *Women of Allah* series.

Thus, those photographs dramatically evidencing their own staging — the full-body composition of Neshat standing upright on a brightly illuminated white platform that sends a glare of light up her chador from below, with its blatantly theatrical *mise-en-scène*, and another bust-length image revealing the figure's spotlit face accompanied by a bold, diagonal shadow on the wall directly behind her — did not make the cut, even as they included the figure's cool, steady return gaze [figs. 17 and 18]. In general, intense shading seemed to have been deemed overwrought, not only emphasizing the photographs' staging, but also as too suggestive, acting too strongly as a metaphor for interiority and psychic complexity. Thus, two rather anomalous photographs in Franklin Furnace displaying Neshat's nude torso, tightly cropped and set in darkened interiors, as well as all of the photographs of limbs in pitch-black settings, were excluded from the later series. These latter photographs — cropped either to render the body sharply fragmented [figs. 19 and 13, sixteenth photograph from the left], or occasionally displaying body parts as though radically disembodied, floating in an indeterminate black space [fig. 20] — insist upon the body and its parts as isolated and solitary, in tenebrous spaces metaphorizing a state of mind or the obscure and unfathomable depths of the psyche. Ultimately, these photographs, I suspect, must have been too evocative of the body's interiority; they shut out and refused the world in ways that the three photographs that made the grade did not.

These latter three photographs, by contrast, reach out emphatically to the world of the viewer and to current affairs both through the figure's direct gaze and her wearing of the *chador*. In drawing the viewer into the tense encounter they frame, Neshat's three photographs refuse to let her art simply to be about “the plight of everyday women in her native Iran”; the photographs insistently stage a relationship between the viewer and the figure represented, whether or not the viewer is prepared to be so involved. At the same time, while the figure's steady and direct gaze contributes to the suggestion of her

⁶⁹ Thus, while Fried's definitions of Minimalism and the experience of viewing Minimalist art are certainly helpful in the approach to Neshat's work — the artist certainly learned from Minimalist aesthetic — Neshat's art also exceeds and departs from those definitions.

⁷⁰ Chapter Two elaborates on the implications of this dialectic between the documentary and the theatrical in *Women of Allah*.

possession of a deep and complex psyche, the photographs also refuse the viewer entry in, keeping him at bay through a vigorous emphasis on surface — both that of the photograph itself, and of the figure's skin — as though to say the viewer's knowledge of the woman could only ever be "skin deep." Indeed, this emphasis on surface is sharpened in the transition from the Franklin Furnace to the *Women of Allah* versions of these photographs: compare the way script is rendered in the two versions of *Offered Eyes* [figs. 16 and 21] and "*Unveiling*" [figs. 15 and 22]; even without reading the script, it is evident that Neshat tightened the lines and fine-tuned her handwriting for *Women of Allah*, ensuring, in the case of "*Unveiling*", that no bit of script exceeded any longer the contours of the figure's face — the effect reducing the sense of the figure's three-dimensional presence and her existence in space, accentuating instead the figure and the photograph as flat surface. (Thus, script — that which treated the figures in Neshat's photographs as she had intended to treat her sculptures in Franklin Furnace — served to render the bodies emphatically un-sculptural, appearing to lack solidity and form.⁷¹) Similarly, Neshat drained the earlier versions of these photographs of their shadows — note that the figure's shadow double in the earlier version of "*Unveiling*" has faded in its *Women of Allah* incarnation — draining the photographs of their exaggerated theatrics and presence.

What emerges are photographs in which the figure at once addresses the viewer as present and sentient, alive and part of the viewer's world, *and* inert and apart. If one of the principle effects of theatricality for Fried involved the viewer's heightened consciousness of his own corporeal position in the encounter with the work of art, there are moments in the viewing of Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographs when, as the following chapter will argue, the viewer's body and subjectivity are out of the picture, so to speak, simply left unimplicated in the Friedian sense; although these moments are always complicated by opposing ones instigated by the photographs. The *Women of Allah* photographs at once suggest and refuse the figure's interiority, suggest and refuse her superficiality. These photographs both emphasize the figure's tangible, material, and embodied presence in a world of depth and solidity, and slip into a state of extreme two-dimensional and superficial flatness. Thus, it seems that Neshat truly did begin to trace at Franklin Furnace the complex and provocative tensions that would come to define her emergent art practice.

EXIT ART, 1992

Franklin Furnace, however, was not the birthplace of Neshat's new practice. Indeed, Neshat's photographs of herself wearing a *chador* began their public life in an exhibition called *Fever*, which opened in December 1992 at the non-profit cultural center and art gallery, Exit Art/The First World, in New York City.⁷² *Fever* thus represents

⁷¹ Script, moreover, participates further in the photographs' refusal of the viewer, emphasizing his or her knowledge of the figure as the knowledge only of externally-imposed identity — an identity constructed on her surface, written on her skin.

⁷² *Fever*'s precise dates were December 14, 1992 – February 6, 1993. Neshat's inclusion in *Fever*, which went on to travel to the Alejandro Otero Museum of Visual Arts in Venezuela, and then to

Neshat's first real breakthrough following her new aesthetic impulse — the show received a lot of press, and Exit Art was by far the most influential venue Neshat had exhibited in up until that point, as the show's dates preceded *Unveiling* by several months.⁷³

In order to celebrate its expansion into a vast new space in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York, the directors of Exit Art, Papo Colo and Jeanette Ingberman, put together an impressive show including roughly 200 artworks by forty-eight young, emerging artists from around the country. According to *Newsweek*, *Fever* was the show to see that year, indeed in the decade, for its discerning, if grim, summary of the 90s, replacing the “money-grubbing sheen” and “glamor” of the previous decade with a sense of “defiant helplessness” more appropriate to the economic recession of the current one.⁷⁴ With so many artworks shown, *Fever* was a highly eclectic exhibition, aiming more to showcase the disparate output of the young artists represented than any cohesive theme. Nonetheless, critics did note an overall emphasis in the exhibition on the body — on the body as “male, female, or [of] a hybrid gender”, as well as on the racial, ethnic, and politicized body — while installation work predominated [fig. 23].⁷⁵ The rear portion of the gallery where Neshat's photographs were shown included, among other items, a family of girdles and corsets stuffed with pillows and placed on the gallery floor by artist Ava Gerber, and a stack of frayed, discolored sofa cushions by Charles LaBelle — artworks made up of soft proxies for the body that, like so much of the fallout of Minimalism's emphasis on the viewer, including Neshat's in this exhibition, required the viewer physically to negotiate their space directly on the gallery floor and seemed literally to take up Fried's description that Minimalist art “must somehow *confront* the beholder—they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way.”⁷⁶

In keeping with the exhibition's preponderance of installation, as well as with Neshat's own interests at the time, her three artworks at *Fever* — photostats of the earliest versions of *Offered Eyes*, the full-body composition of the figure standing upon a plinth, and the bust-length image of Neshat wearing a chador and accompanied by a bold shadow behind her — were displayed as sculptural objects [figs. 24, 25]. Whereas at

the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Ohio, therefore served as a major precedent for her next important career opportunity in the solo show at Franklin Furnace Gallery. This dissertation is the first, to my knowledge, to analyze Neshat's display of her photographs at Exit Art and to situate the works in relation to her future practice. (As of October 2001, this venue has simply been known as Exit Art — a decision that might have been prompted by the events of September 11, 2001; the *New York Times* lists the gallery's name as “Exit Art/The First World” for the last time on September 9, 2001).

⁷³ Although the *Fever* show is typically included in catalogues of Neshat's art under the category “Selected Group Exhibitions,” it is always listed as a 1993 exhibition, suggesting an erroneous place in the trajectory of Neshat's career (see *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* [Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1997], n.p.; and *Shirin Neshat: “Women of Allah”* [Vancouver, BC: Artspeak Gallery, 1997], 30).

⁷⁴ Peter Plagens, “Summing Up Gloom and Doom: Entrance to the New Decade is the New Exit,” *Newsweek*, January 25, 1993, 58.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Hess, “Give me Fever,” *The Village Voice*, December 29, 1992, 95.

⁷⁶ Fried, 127.

Franklin Furnace the photographs' were printed on a small scale (roughly 8½ x 11 inches), and displayed in clusters along the wall, the three images in *Fever* were blown up to 2 x 4 feet; each photostat was then wrapped around one of the gallery's pillars, placed near to one another, with its bottom edge set about a foot above the floor. While Ingberman recalls that it was Colo who suggested the site-specific placement of the photographs around the pillars, the inclusion of stones piled in a pyramidal fashion on the floor to reach the base of each photograph was surely Neshat's own idea.⁷⁷ This combination of stones with the photographs' cylindrical display made Neshat's artworks in *Fever* more emphatically sculptural and three-dimensional than they would later appear at Franklin Furnace, while in the case of the full-body composition this display resulted in the image of the woman appearing to stand at around five feet tall — nearly life-sized, a substantive human presence to be reckoned with on those terms.⁷⁸

The stones at Exit Art anticipate their appearance in Franklin Furnace, though in *Fever* their conflation with Islam as a destructive force was more directly invoked than in the later exhibition. While suggestive of a funeral cairn, the placement of the stones at Exit Art, paired with the three vertical photographs of women, mirrors more closely their arrangement in the circumstance of stoning in contemporary Iran, where women are buried in an upright position to face their punishment.⁷⁹ Although to my knowledge Neshat did not receive any direct press for her inclusion in *Fever*, the reference was not lost on at least one viewer. In conversation with Ingberman upon the occasion of *Fever*'s opening, Stuart Anthony, curator at Exit Art, described Neshat's art as follows:

... Her work is dealing with identity, like several other people in the show I've talked to you about, particularly as a woman from the Middle East. Most of her images deal with herself and these black veils. Of course the women in Iran have to wear the veils and the traditional dress no matter who they are, even if you are an American going there you have to dress that way or you'll be abused, stoned to death, actually. Some of her pieces have piles of stones built up around the images, almost obliterating them. They are photographs that have drawings over them and also words written on them, particularly parts of the Koran, etc.⁸⁰

These unpublished comments constitute some of the earliest assessments and understandings of Neshat's new aesthetic. Made informally, Anthony's statements and their presumptuous tone enact familiarity with conditions within Iran and the Middle East more broadly ("of course," "you'll be abused, stoned to death, actually"), while openly revealing the brand of hasty, uninformed assumption that Neshat's oeuvre would soon begin frequently to elicit.⁸¹ Anthony erroneously described Neshat's artworks in *Fever* —

⁷⁷ Personal conversation with Ingberman, 9.20.2010.

⁷⁸ On the margins of the exhibition's checklist, the curators distinguished the artworks in *Fever* as either "flat" or "sculpture." Neshat's three artworks were identified on the list as "sculpture." Exit Art Archives, Shirin Neshat, Box 1 of 2, "Shipping Information," file 7/44.

⁷⁹ See footnote 75 for a brief account of this practice.

⁸⁰ The passage is an excerpt from an undated transcript of conversations about the artists and artworks represented in *Fever*. Exit Art Archives, Shirin Neshat, Box 2 of 2, "Artists and Works", file 18/18.

⁸¹ Needless to say, the punishment doled out to women failing to adhere to the codes of pious Islamic dress in postrevolutionary Iran has never been death-by-stoning; nor is it possible to refer to the *chador* in Neshat's photographs as "traditional," as the black *chador* became prevalent in

the stones, piled up so as just to touch the base of each photograph upon the pillar, did not “almost obliterate” the images of the women, and the script written upon the photographs were not Qu’ranic citations but rather quotations of contemporary feminist Iranian poetry. Nevertheless, elements of Neshat’s display of her photographs at Exit Art helped to provoke those responses.

MINOR INJURY, 1989

In early 1989, Neshat co-organized with artist, Yong Soon Min, a month-long exhibition at the alternative art space, Minor Injury, in Brooklyn, where she had exhibited her own art several years prior.⁸² *Homeland: A Palestinian Quest* (April 30 - May 21, 1989) was developed out of a response to two major developments of the previous years — the popular uprising beginning in late 1987 in the Palestinian territories against Israeli occupation, still continuing through the period of the exhibition, and the recent signing of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed the establishment of the State of Palestine, by the Palestinian National Council in November 1988. The show’s organizers invited “exhibitors of diverse origins” to contribute their aesthetic responses to those events, and the exhibition’s concept reveals something of a shift in Neshat’s artistic practice — away from the broader, humanist sensibility evidenced in the *Voices of Silence* installation (in its address to Poverty and Plenty), and toward an art motivated by particular, current social, political and historical events. What interests me about *Homeland*, however, is not so much this latter point but a rather unlikely artwork included in the show.

Peter Gourfain’s *You Can’t Buy My Spirit* was in fact possibly the least overtly political artwork in an exhibition that included works such as *Gaza, Dec. 1987*:

the revolutionary and postrevolutionary years, and therefore represents a rather recent phenomenon in Iran. See Minoo Moallem’s discussion of the *chador* and Islamic nationalism in the 1970s in Iran, in *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*: “Before the Iranian revolution, women used to wear floral, colorful, and sometimes very transparent chadors made from delicate tissues, including silk and lace. During and after the revolution, a thick black chador replaced all other versions and became the national dress for women” (*Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005], 190). Moreover, Moallem’s assertion — that “[i]t is a mistake to read women’s acceptance of the fundamentalist encouragement [in the revolutionary moment] to wear the black chador as a sign of either passivity or religiosity. Women perceived it rather as a gendered invitation to political participation and as a sign of membership, belonging, and complicity” — complicates Anthony’s implicit assumption that the *chador* signifies female oppression (110). For a broader analysis and a more historical treatment of the role of the *chador* in Neshat’s photographs, please refer to Chapter Three of this study.

⁸² Yong Soon Min is a contemporary Korean American artist (b. 1953, Seoul, Korea), whose performance and installation-based practice concentrates on issues of representation and identity. Like Neshat, Min received her B.A. (1975) and M.F.A. (1979) from U.C. Berkeley, where the two overlapped for several years. According to Neshat’s CV in the archive at Exit Art, Min curated a show, “History”, at Minor Injury in 1986, in which Neshat exhibited work. Min is currently a professor of Studio Art at the University of California, Irvine.

Hommage [sic] to the Youth Who Died Fighting Bullets with Stones and Occupation with Resistance. Nonetheless, Gourfain's sculpture was the one chosen to represent *Homeland* on the front cover of the exhibition brochure, a choice that likely had more to do with how the image functioned there than with its content [fig. 26]; for the photographic reproduction of Gourfain's work reveals the back of a hand and forearm sculpted in clay, resting upright upon a wooden base in a pitch black setting, with fingers taut so that, in the context of the brochure, the hand seems to command readers to "stop" and "pay attention," urging them to read on.

Although in the 1960s, Gourfain (b. 1934) had been associated with Minimalism (his abstract paintings were included in the important *Systemic Painting* show at the Guggenheim in New York City in 1966), by the seventies, his art took a distinct turn toward the figurative, and eventually toward sculpture in wood and clay increasingly influenced by Romanesque reliefs. The Brooklyn Museum staged a solo exhibition of his art in 1987 — perhaps prompting his subsequent invitation to produce a sculpture for *Homeland* — documenting the artist's transition from large-scale, abstract Minimalist sculpture, to a style of figurative art committed to representing history and narrative in a way that Lucy R. Lippard has described as "rhythmic" and "cinematic."⁸³

Gourfain has used the sculpted image of the hand and forearm at least since the late 1980s, citing an eclectic range of sources Lippard identifies as including "the Hand of Fatima, Roman imagery, Christian reliquaries, [and] Pre-Columbian hands in which the fingers become figures."⁸⁴ *You Can't Buy My Spirit* shows a conspicuous affinity to Lippard's description of Pre-Columbian hands, the sculpture teeming with human figures sculpted in low relief along the surface of the forearm all the way up to the fingers. Although the narrative carved into Gourfain's sculpture is too difficult to discern in the *Homeland* brochure's dark and grainy reproduction, presumably it relates episodes in the Palestinian cause for independence.⁸⁵ *You Can't Buy My Spirit* looks most closely like another, untitled 1989 sculpture [fig. 27], both portraying four heads — visible on the palm in *Untitled*, and on the back of the hand in the sculpture at *Homeland* — joined together with harmoniously swirling lower bodies. Language, communication and sociability between bodies is emphasized in these sculptures, with the figures that compose the hand's fingers depicted as though in conversation with one another. Indeed, *Untitled* (as well as other related sculptures by the artist) even represents language as a graphic element directly on its surface, in the form of words in American sign language etched along the edge of the forearm below the little finger/figure.

I have digressed here in order to describe Gourfain's sculpture not because I think his work is particularly interesting, but because I want to suggest that certain aspects of *You Can't Buy My Spirit* might have resonated with Neshat and her own practice — not

⁸³ Lucy R. Lippard, "Silence Would Be a Compromise," in *Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze and Works on Paper* (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), 18 and 17, respectively.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁵ Thus, in *Powerful Days*, 1992-3, a work that formally resembles Gourfain's *Homeland* sculpture, the artist carved notable moments in the Civil Rights Movement, including the Freedom March of 1963 and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech, into the sculpture's forearm (*Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze and Works on Paper*, 72).

least the sculpture's mode of direct address and its cultivation of the expressive potential of the image of the hand. *You Can't Buy My Spirit* suggests that the body, indeed even its fragments, belongs not just to a single figure, but is composed out of many bodies — those with whom it has come into direct contact, and those who form its histories. “The” body, that is, *embodies* other bodies; and art can make that embodiment material, thus making present and tangible the way in which bodies are always shaped by their relations with others and with the past. That Gourfain and Neshat both use the hand — a synecdoche for creative production, but also for signification more broadly — underscores their interest in signification, which emerges in their art practices as graphic, verbal language (in both cases, moreover, in forms which few of their viewers are able to read). And again, recall that Neshat's photographs were initially conceived as sculptures — as hands composed of bricks, sandblasted with words.

Gourfain's *You Can't Buy My Spirit* might have spoken to Neshat because of its status as a tangible, three-dimensional thing occupying literal space, and because of the contingent, embodied encounter provoked by its quasi-columnar presence.⁸⁶ Neshat, as we know, was already invested in sculpture at this point in her career. However, what seems to have made an impact on Neshat's future art practice was Gourfain's sculpture *reproduced as a photograph*, for, while the photograph clearly emphasizes the sculpture's three-dimensional, tactile quality, it radically alters the terms of the viewer's encounter. The photograph frames the sculpture, consigning it to a fixed point of view and opposing the open-ended encounter invited by sculpture in the round. In this way, the photograph stabilizes the sculpture's spatial ambiguity, offering the spectator a single, totalizing view. At the same time, the photograph of Gourfain's sculpture makes clear that it denies what more there is to see: the sculpture's black setting — anomalous in reproductions of Gourfain's work — lends the image a haunting quality, while spotlighting overexposes the sculpture's outermost surfaces and a dark vertical shadow obscures the relief etched upon the arm's left edge; most of all, the narrative episodes on the inside surface of the arm and hand are beyond the scope of the photograph's view.

These, I believe, were the lessons Neshat would later test and work through at Exit Art and Franklin Furnace Gallery. While at Exit Art, Neshat opted to combine her interest in site-specific sculpture with photography, installing stones at the base of her photographic images, at Franklin Furnace, the artist pried the two media apart, including sculptural installations on the one hand, and photographs on the other, though it wasn't yet clear which, if either, version of her practice, would eventually take precedence over the other. Ultimately, Neshat settled upon a photographic practice that would incorporate those aspects of sculpture that would allow her art at once to invoke sculptural mass, spatiality and contingency, while still structuring the viewer's embodied encounter. When Neshat framed the projection of the woman on the stones in the Franklin Furnace untitled floor installation in order to produce her still photographs, she not only made the figure upright and frontal, but also fixed her in a still photographic image; at the same time, however, in so doing Neshat denied the viewer the privilege of walking around the sculpture — of being afforded multiple views of the figure — and also fixed him as an

⁸⁶ Although the *Homeland* brochure does not say how tall *You Can't Buy My Spirit* was, Gourfain's *Untitled*, fig. 27 stands nearly four feet tall — a significant, physical presence to be contended with (*Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze and Works on Paper*, 63).

object of the figure's stare. Thus, Neshat's photographs emerged out of her thinking on the affective, embodied and contingent possibilities of the encounter with sculpture, but she would remake that encounter as one in which space and point of view could be controlled.

HOMAGE TO ORIGINS, NOVEMBER 1988

This chapter has traced the trajectory of Neshat's art since the early 1980s, aiming to introduce a practice of aesthetic continuities as much as of breaks and changes, of thematic links as much as of shifts and ruptures. My aim has been to broaden our understanding of Neshat's art practice by bringing to light heretofore unknown and unexamined examples of some of her earliest artistic endeavors, demonstrating cohesive concerns within her career. Thus, Neshat's shift to the medium of photography, for example, embeds and incorporates her own prior interest in sculpture. And, as my final example will show, Iran of the pre- as well as of the post-Revolutionary period has always served as one of her points of reference. Tracing the trajectory of Neshat's art backwards in time from the moment of her important 1993 solo exhibition at Franklin Furnace Gallery — long considered the birthplace of Neshat's artistic practice — helps, I hope, to unravel the prevalent originary myth of the artist conceived whole from of a decisive, formative first trip to the Islamic Republic of Iran after nearly a decade in exile, enabling us to think more historically and dialectically about Neshat's practice. This reverse chronological progression aims not, however, to suggest the possibility of excavating a true and accurate, irreducible originary site of Neshat's art, but rather to propose origins as textured sites of complex and dynamic sedimentation, heterogeneous and multiple, rather than fixed, homogeneous and singular.

This chapter therefore began with *two* stories of origins — stories that at times overlap and at others contradict one another — offering both (and the conceptual possibility of others still) as significant backdrops to understanding Neshat's art practice. For origins do matter, independent of their accuracy or authenticity and despite poststructuralist critiquing to the contrary. They matter insofar as there are stories told about them; their value and currency lies in their transmission and telling, their reception and retelling. Origins and their stories are lived and experienced, shared and clung to, even as their mythical and fictive status is well recognized, and even as they morph, shift, and transform with each retelling. Perhaps particularly for those forcibly distanced from their origins, they are not a theoretical construct to be dismantled at will. Origin stories help some of us to make sense of our history and our present — serving a need to give meaning and purpose to our lives — but they also help make sense of the future, laying the foundations for what is to come; in that sense, to reiterate, origins matter not for any essential truths recovered at their source, but in their always provisional and contingent relationship with the present and future. This, ultimately, is one of the lessons of Neshat's art — which always underscores the ever-dynamic relationship of history and the past to the present and future.

This question of origins, moreover, is particularly charged and overdetermined with respect to Iran, where the Pahlavi regime, beginning with the reign of Reza Shah in 1921, predicated itself on the construction of a nationalist ideology based, in the words of

gender theorist and historian of Iran, Mino Moallem, “on the revival of [Iran’s] pre-Islamic past,” celebrating and underscoring Persianness while suppressing elements within Iranian culture evidencing Arab or Islamic influence, as well as other ethnic or communal identities.⁸⁷ The Islamic regime, in turn, has foregrounded its own set of “pictorial and mythological tropes,” predicated on the recovery of a Shi’a brand of Islam, in conjunction with a more transnational notion of Islamic community, attempting to expel non-Islamic aspects of Iranian vernacular culture.⁸⁸ What neither regime seems to have understood, is the deeply embedded social significance of these various cultural formations, which cannot simply be obliterated as a matter of doctrine, and which — as malleable traditions based not on authoritative texts but on centuries of cultural overlap and changing embodied practices — cannot be claimed or denied as categorically “Persian” or “Islamic.”

Accordingly, as this chapter began with two stories of origins, it will end in knowing “homage” to their coexistence. *Homage to Origins* was the title Neshat gave to the issue of the New York-based visual art journal, *New Observations*, that she guest edited for its November 1988 publication [fig. 28].⁸⁹ With entries by artists, curators, academics and architects whom Neshat had invited to make submissions (among them Alfredo Jaar, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Kyong Park, and her collaborator to be, Yong Soon Min), the journal included brief articles as well as poems, photographs and collages offering dynamic treatments on the topic of origins, bi-culturalism, and the U.S./Mexico border. The publication was prefaced by a two-page spread authored by Neshat, comprising a reproduction of a watercolor and ink drawing spanning horizontally across the top portion of the pages (resembling a sort of banner or handscroll), as well as a text at the bottom, also titled “Homage to Origins,” examining issues of exile and displacement, art, architecture, and tradition, as much as of origins [fig. 29].

“Is it a fantasy,” Neshat asks in her text’s opening rush of questions, “to think that the concept of the roots and origins of man still exist and are important even in this time and century? Has modern living simply reduced us to beings only concerned with the immediate present and future? Is it unreasonable to speak about spirituality that is imbedded in one’s roots of origin? Should one be ashamed to feel nostalgia?”⁹⁰ Further on in her text, in partial response to her questions, Neshat compares art produced in “traditional societies” to art produced “today.” Whereas “[i]n traditional societies,” such as, Neshat later clarifies, in Islamic ones, “one’s creative energies were motivated in response to an urge to express his [*sic*] thoughts and sentiments in life. . . [t]oday the role

⁸⁷ Moallem, 63.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁹ Begun in the early 1980s and discontinued as of 1997, *New Observations* was a not-for-profit, visual arts periodical; each issue was assembled by a guest editor selected on the basis of a proposal concerning his or her chosen topic and potential contributors. Given that critics and scholars of Neshat’s art have all accepted the Franklin Furnace Gallery *Unveiling* exhibition as Neshat’s first foray into the artworld, no one has yet, to my knowledge, located *Homage to Origins* or analyzed its significance within Neshat’s practice.

⁹⁰ Shirin Neshat, “Homage to Origins,” *New Observations* 62 (New York: New Observations, Ltd., November 1988), 2-3.

of an artist is constituted in experimentation, progression, and creation of the avant-garde.” This avant-garde artist “tests new ideas in his laboratory and searches for a new product,” producing, in this quest for the ever new, an art merely “commercial” and “materialistic,” disconnected from history, life and experience.

In contrast, the Islamic art and architecture that Neshat privileges are characterized by unity and spirituality, “transcending the relationship between earth and heaven, man and God.” To clarify and validate her position and its chosen terms, Neshat includes a quotation concerning the function of geometric shapes in Islamic architecture: such shapes, according to Islamic studies scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, serve beyond a technical architectural function, also “remind[ing] man through their symbolic aspect of the spiritual principles which the traditional building ... reflects on its own level of reality which also corresponds to an inner state of man himself. In traditional architecture, as in all traditional art, nothing is ever divorced from meaning. And meaning is none other than the spiritual.”⁹¹

Although Neshat’s text may seem naïve in its assessments of contemporary western and Islamic art, and although it reproduces stereotypes concerning the difference between western and Islamic societies as a division between the modern and the traditional, it also reveals the artist’s struggles at this early point in her career to find a language to clarify her concerns, and her efforts to engage and instruct herself in relevant literature toward this goal — a means that would become instrumental to her forthcoming practice. Ultimately, what Neshat privileges in Islamic art, as understood through Nasr, is the way in which its forms relate to the viewer in a deep and intimate way, giving him meaning, and reaching him on an affective, emotive, or “spiritual” level. Art, for Neshat, must somehow intimately connect to one’s life and histories, and she closes her text stating, “[m]y desire to pay an homage to origins is the same as my need to place art within life. . . . To disregard our origins is like living without birth.”

Neshat’s clearest description of the kind of experience she seeks art to offer therefore occurs not through the statements in which she adopts Nasr’s terms and attempts to come to terms with the issue of origins in an intellectual way, but rather through a more indirect narration of her own personal recollections, showing an absorption of lessons learned at an affective and emotional level:

When I was young, I never understood why the women dressed in black veils came to sob and cry while the Mullah chanted awesomely of the life and death of the saint in Arabic. No one spoke Arabic! Why did my mother and others cry so hard if they did not even understand the meanings of those words? I only know now that they sobbed and cried because there was a moment that their culture and religion legitimately allowed pure release of emotion and sorrow of their personal tragedies. It was more amazing to see that once the ceremony was over, women recomposed and returned to normal life so quickly. Seventeen years later I take refuge in hearing the awesome sound of a recorded Islamic chanting (which I do not understand!) in America. The chanting simply overtakes me every time.

⁹¹ Ibid., 3, quoted from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, foreword to *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xiii.

What Neshat describes is a form of religious ritual centered around a mullah's narration to a congregation of pious female believers. In such a ritual, the mullah does not read from a prepared script or religious text, offering instead a powerful, extemporaneous narration, intoning his voice and moving his body with gestures appropriate to descriptions of the lives of Shi'a imams. The women, in turn, respond in their own distinct style of ritualistic cries and tears befitting the ceremony, each woman rocking her body at her own pace but in a manner similar to the others, to the sound of her own cries as well as to the cries of the other women and the mullah's words. These pious women thus respond physically and emotively to a language whose meaning they do not themselves understand, and though they are already familiar with the details of the lives and deaths of the imams, they do not know the particular details offered in any given rendition of these stories. Instead, the women respond to the sound and intonations of the mullah's words, and to the pace of his gestures and his facial expressions (which might suggest his place in the narration, particularly in its familiar climactic moments), as well as to one another's motions and cries. Each woman, therefore, to a certain extent, interprets in her own way these gestures and the words and sounds she hears, also, according to Neshat, *re*-interpreting them according to her own life. The experience is thus sonic, physical, and affective, as well as both individual and shared, and the ritual foregrounds not the content or meaning of the religious narration — although that content is certainly important to the mullah and to his listeners — but rather its form and the affective responses of the women involved.

Neshat's recollection provides one of the clearest articulations of the aims, objectives, and modes of her art practice, comprising the various elements that would come to define her work: language, sound, citation, communication, dialogue both verbal and embodied, and a relationship to the past as well as to the present and future, all form the bases of Neshat's current art practice. Although the mullah in Neshat's narrative recites a religious story, and although Neshat's artworks typically recite contemporary Iranian poetry, both, as the following chapters will contend, engage in a form of citation, that involves transforming their citations according to the particular contexts in which they are invoked.

Neshat, moreover, does not attempt to offer her viewers the experience of the women in the ritual — who are moved in a pious, as well as personal, way — but rather something more akin to her own experience listening to “the awesome sound of a recorded Islamic chanting (which I do not understand!) in America.”⁹² Neshat's experience is distant from its source, indirect, and mediated. Like the women in her narrative, she does not understand the Arabic chanting, though she too is powerfully moved by it; at the same time, however, she does not respond physically or affectively in

⁹² See also the following statements, made by Neshat in a 2006 interview: “As a young person, I was always drawn to religion — ‘Islam’ and the idea of ‘faith.’ In fact I prayed daily even if I didn't understand the meaning of those Arabic words that I recited everyday. For us, religion functioned as a collective activity that offered emotional and psychological security and comfort. I remember as I arrived in the USA, and as my mild religious practice dissipated, came an overwhelming feeling of ‘loss’ and ‘displacement’, that I have never completely recovered from” (John Lekay, “Shirin Neshat,” in *Heyoka Magazine* 4, [Spring 2006], web publication, <http://heyokamagazine.com/HEYOKA.4.FOTOS.ShirinNeshat.htm>).

a manner resembling the women's response to the mullah's narration. Her own response is nonetheless affective and embodied — the sounds “overtake” her — resonating with an aspect of her own experience deeply sedimented in the roots of her culture and her persona.

In her own art, Neshat proposes that viewers try to access a similar kind of experience — that they try to form their own ways to understand and appreciate a culture and kind of experience which they, as did Neshat in her childhood, might find baffling and strange. The artist proposes that the steps to reaching such an experience lie partially in language and dialogue — a language whose particular meaning and significance viewers likely cannot understand, but to whose form and texture, pace and external manifestation, they might nonetheless relate, particularly in its pairing with the visual component of Neshat's art practice. (Indeed, *not* understanding the specific meaning of the words cited upon Neshat's art already aligns viewers with the position of Neshat herself, and of most Iranians, both secular and religious, to an enormously significant aspect of their culture.) Relating to this language, viewers might be able to form meaningful connections to the strange and unfamiliar figures wearing the *chador* — as well as to their histories and traditions — represented in Neshat's art, therefore entertaining a moment of shared experience and imagining a form of affective and embodied conversation with the Other that involves also engaging, if only temporarily, her worldview, eliciting a vision of coexistence in which bodies might be remade through their encounters.⁹³

At the same time, the words in the mullah's narration and in the poetry of Neshat's citations do signify and carry meaningful weight to certain listeners or viewers. As Neshat's practice becomes more internationally recognized and as more Iranians and readers of Persian become familiar with her art, it becomes clear that, while one of the registers through which her art is comprehended (and which it actively thematizes in its incorporation of Persian script) is through “not understanding,” the other register involving the content and histories of the words cited also ought to be accounted for. The artworks thus comprise and elicit multiple coexisting registers and meanings — meanings that occasionally conflict and contradict one another, but that ultimately share the same space, mutually conditioning and inflecting one another. It is with both of these registers in mind that I turn, in closing, to the watercolor and ink drawing reproduced at the top of the *Homage to Origins* spread.

In the graphic portion of Neshat's spread, the horizontal drawing displays the tracing of two hands, one at either end of the image. Evoking a more figurative version of the Hand of Fatimah, Neshat drew a face on the palm of each hand, each with a pair of eyes, a clearly delineated nose and set of eyebrows, and each with its mouth partially-obscured — by a thick pattern of parallel lines over the mouth of the “left-hand” face,

⁹³ What Neshat's experience of the sounds of prerecorded Islamic chanting suggests is that we do not have to understand the chanting *in the same way* as do those who perform in the chanting (just as we do not have to understand or reinterpret the mullah's words in the same way as do the pious women), in order to appreciate and be moved powerfully by those sounds. Similarly, we do not have to understand the direct meaning of the words present on the surface of Neshat's photographs, in order to access and approach *other* meanings evoked by their visual texture.

and heavy crosshatching just beneath the nose of the “right-hand” face. To my eye, the left-hand face, with its thin, arching eyebrows reads as female, and the right-hand face, with its thicker, blunter eyebrows, as male, though the sketchy quality of the image makes it difficult to be certain. Whether or not these “figures” are separated by gender, represented with their fingers reaching away from one another, their mouths obstructed, and lying on their backs upon the same plane, the image suggests that the two cannot speak or make contact with one another, despite their proximity and resemblance, and despite that they share the same “body.” Underscoring their separation, the journal’s spine severs the figures’ shared body in two. And yet, while the figures cannot communicate with one another, they both reach out to the viewer, as each pair of eyes gazes straight out of the image and ahead. Thus, though the *Homage to Origins* spread differs in medium from Neshat’s photographs of the early 1990s, it presages those later works through its use of the evocative imagery of hands, its indexing of Neshat’s body, and the figures’ return gazes — linking the artist’s production from the period preceding her homecoming visit to Iran to that which succeeded it.

In contrast to the sleek and cool aesthetic of her photographs, however, the media in play in the *Homage to Origins* drawing have the look of a rapidly and feverishly executed sketch. The ink lines — particularly around the faces and on the body of the figures — appear hurriedly scratched on and tensely layered, while the watercolor strokes are broad and unconcerned with the edges of things. Similarly, the Persian script surrounding the image — another clear link to Neshat’s imminent practice — is written in a hasty scrawl, the handwriting occasionally illegible. Whereas the typewritten English text below reads in a straightforwardly linear fashion from left to right, broken only by tidy columns and the change in pages, it is not always clear how the Persian passages are organized — whether certain sentences, for example, continue fluidly from right to left across the scroll, or whether they jump down to a line below — thus making their meaning dynamic and dependent to an extent on the reader. Nor is there a clear starting point from which the text ought to be read. Given the right-to-left directionality of Persian script, the passage of writing at the top of furthestmost right edge of the scroll might be one logical place to begin reading, but the text there progresses vertically downwards (between the fingers of the right-hand hand), and is thinner and sparser than in other areas, seeming as though it might have been added later. (That there is no line framing the right edge of the scroll also makes that area seem more open-ended than ordinary.) Another potential place to begin reading is the area of text at the top of the scroll beginning above the right-hand little finger and proceeding horizontally across the image toward the left-hand thumb, though the text at the left edge of the scroll — where the handwriting changes orientation — provides a competing, if less intuitive, starting point. Thus, even Neshat’s sketch suggests that beginnings are provisional and contingent — a matter of interpretation and reinterpretation rather than fixity.

While these aspects of the script can be discerned by non-readers of Persian — by viewers perceptive of the formal and visual qualities of the script — the writing upon Neshat’s scroll nonetheless possesses a content that ought to be accounted for. Shifting the two-page spread over ninety-degrees to consider the passage of script at its left edge, viewers literate in Persian can decipher the first two verses of an unidentified poem that reads: “Although Iran is nothing but a stopping place for ruin, I love this stopping place

for ruin. Although our history is the color of fables, I love these fables.” In the context of Neshat’s image, the words could be interpreted as those of the muted faces represented upon the hands; in the context of November 1988, with the publication of the *Homage to Origins* issue of *New Observations*, Iran as a “stopping place for ruin” would seem to suggest that moment in the country’s history, a decade after the Islamic Revolution and just months after the end of the devastating war with Iraq — a war that claimed around 1,000,000 Iranian, and up to 500,000 Iraqi, casualties. A grim reading of the image might thus interpret the strange figures lying there prone upon their backs as though near death, malformed as a result of the chemical and biological weapons used by Iraq in its attacks.

Some readers of those verses, however, might also recognize them as the first two verses of the poem, “Love of the Iranian Land” (“*Mehr-e Iranzamin*”) by the Iranian poet, Hossein Pezhman Bakhtiari (1900-1974).⁹⁴ Bakhtiari’s poem was written not in the late 1980s, but rather in 1941 — the year that Britain and the USSR invaded a neutral Iran during World War II in order to ensure the security of Iranian oil fields from German hands and to use its strategically situated rail lines to transport American supplies up from the Persian Gulf to the Soviet Union, ultimately resulting in Reza Shah Pahlavi’s forced abdication in favor of his son Mohammad Reza.⁹⁵ Written in response to these events, Bakhtiari’s poem is deeply nationalistic, describing in all its eight verses a fervent and unflagging love for Iran, despite any externally perceived flaws. Accordingly, in its first verse, the poetic voice declares that it will love Iran even if the country is merely the site of destruction, referring not only to Iran’s turbulent present but also to its history as a site of repeated foreign aggression and invasions. In the following verse, appropriate in this broader discussion of origins, the voice declares that it loves Iran’s history, even though that history is better known through Iran’s celebrated fables, poems and epic stories than through authoritative texts.⁹⁶ Along the scroll’s right edge, Neshat transcribed a third verse from Bakhtiari’s poem — “Although its air and water might not be agreeable [as in, to all who breathe and drink it], I love this air and water” — leaving out from her artwork the remaining verses and thus leaving it up to the reader either to recall and complete Bakhtiari’s poem, or to imagine for herself how it might continue and conclude. Whether or not the reader recognizes the poem’s source and the layered

⁹⁴ Although Bakhtiari’s “*Mehr-e Iranzamin*” is a well-known nationalist Iranian poem, no one has yet identified this poem as the one Neshat appropriated and quoted on her *Homage to Origins* drawing. The poem is from Bakhtiari’s *Salt Desert of Thoughts (Kavir-e Andisheh: Guzidah-i Ash’ar Dar Sih Qismat)*, originally published by Intisharat-i Ibn Sīnā in 1970, 276, and reprinted by Diba in 1993, 228. *Kavir-e Andisheh* has not been translated into English; I give my own translations here of the relevant passages of Bakhtiari’s poem.

⁹⁵ In a footnote to the poem, Bakhtiari explains that “*Mehr-e Iranzamin*” was penned in response to foreign “disrespect” (*bi-ehterami*) to Iranian soil (*ibid.*). The Shah’s abdication was ‘suggested’ to him by the British: “Would His Highness kindly abdicate in favour of his son, the heir to the throne? We have a high opinion of him and will ensure his position. But his Highness should not think there is any other solution” (Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand [London: Penguin Books, 2006], 25).

⁹⁶ Hakim Abol Qasem Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* (written about 1000 A.D.), to name one hugely significant cultural example, is an epic poem written in some 60,000 verses that weaves together mythical and historical narratives of Iran’s past from the creation of the world until the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century.

nuances elicited by Neshat's citation of the poem upon her drawing, in 1988, its meaning certainly resonated with Iran's current circumstances; to a reader exiled in America following the 1979 Revolution, the poem's nationalistic fervor might well have been particularly bittersweet.

The remaining scrawls upon Neshat's drawing — appearing above and below the pair of hands and their shared body — are also written in a poetic, elegiac tone, and these act, perhaps even more directly than do the words of Bakhtiari's poem, as though emitted by the figures represented in the drawing.⁹⁷ These words, written rapidly and loosely, are the most ambiguous and difficult to read upon the scroll. Above the body, and speaking perhaps to the schematic illustration of a spirit depicted there (though perhaps to the reader as well), the words first ask, "Are you an angel?," and then plead, "Come to our rescue. Our meaningless laughter has no place. The courage in our hearts is boiling." In the following lines they declare, "The veins of our hands, they have cut from their own hands. Come to our rescue, oh, oh angel." From there, the remaining script becomes even more abstract and illegible; in one place, it reads "full of blood [...] is deathly," and in two areas, "Our other half, is no longer a half." In stark contrast to the passionate, but structured and composed, tone of the nationalistic poem framing these lines on either side, the phrases at the center of the drawing are exclamatory, crying out against some unnamed threat enacting violence upon the body. Below, in the English portion of Neshat's spread, the artist reveals perhaps the cause of the figures' cries; there Neshat describes — in formulaic terms borrowed from contemporary discourse on the subjective conditions of exile and displacement — the "life of an immigrant" as one characterized by "crisis," "distort[ion]," and the division of "one's perception in two." "The experience of bi-culturalism may be enriching," she writes, but it also involves living in an "in between" state. In English, the "bi-cultural" experience is perceptual and cerebral, and might even be rationalized as valuably constructive to one's development. By contrast, above in the Persian portion of the spread, the experience is deeply painful and intensely embodied. Her exiled condition, Neshat seems to say, feels like violent rupture with a part of her own body. The two hands, sharing a body, but their scribbled veins severed by the seam of the page, embody that violent cut and rupture.

Whereas this analysis of the *Homage to Origins* spread suggests that some viewers might have been able to read the Persian script written upon it, the truth of the matter is that very few readers of *New Observations* are likely to have possessed that ability, and Neshat herself surely knew that. Thus, any textual invitation for readers to engage with her artwork — to recall and recite, for example, Bakhtiari's poem — was surely lost on the majority of the magazine's readership, and the impassioned pleas and cries in the upper half of the spread remained largely personal.

⁹⁷ Although Neshat may have appropriated these other verses and verse fragments from another preexisting poem, as she did with "*Mehr-e Iranzamin*," I have not yet been able to locate the source, and the translations offered here of these verses are my own. When asked if she could explain the text and imagery in *Homage to Origins*, Neshat did not identify Bakhtiari's poem as a source for her writing, and dismissed the spread's significance, responding that "the writing does not make much sense, and the picture is just typical of my doodlings" (personal conversation with the artist, 6.1.2010).

And yet, the pain conveyed in these scribbled poems is nevertheless telegraphed by the visual qualities of the image, through the drama of the strange body at once whole and severed. Moreover, just as the English text describes verbally Neshat's appreciation for a form of art that links art to life and history, the artwork in the upper portion of the spread invites viewers to feel a bodily resonance with that engagement. Rotating the journal to view it vertically — whether to read the Persian lines written at the banner's left edge, or to view the graphic appearance of the words' marks — the viewer engages with the artwork in a dynamic and transformative way. For shifting the journal to a vertical view, the viewer also upends the body depicted in the spread, turning the figure over so that, rather than lie horizontal as though approaching death, the 'female' hand instead stands upright, supported by the fingers of her other half (fig. 30). As though presaging the reproduction of Gourfain's *You Can't Buy My Spirit* on the pages of the *Homeland* brochure the following year, Neshat's watercolor and ink drawing, thus turned over, commands viewers to "stop" and "engage" further with the artwork printed in the journal. To do so, the viewer/reader might well place her own hand upon the image — to follow along with her finger the words written there, or perhaps, in a reflexive gesture, to measure her own hand against the one traced in the picture — inadvertently aligning her body with the one represented in the drawing, forming a connection with a body that might initially have appeared abject, foreign and aberrant. Thus unified in gesture, the viewer and the represented body make a pact, sharing (holding, protecting) the silent figure between their palms. In this act, the viewer might at last understand herself to be like the body represented in the drawing: both single and double, individual, multiple, and communal — composed of, and embodying, other bodies whose material traces are present in the lines of her own hand.

Finally, just as the viewer/reader and the body in the artwork eventually come together and interact, so too do the two hands represented. For although these hands are severed and separate, distanced from one another and discrete, when the pages are closed and the journal put away, they nonetheless meet, remaining intertwined until they are called upon again to remember and retrieve history.

CHAPTER TWO:
WOMEN OF ALLAH IN NESHAT'S APARTMENT

I explain that this is a country built on freedoms... I think, however, that the conversation would be of greater value if the lady took the covering from her face. Indeed, the value of a meeting... is so that you can — almost literally — see what the other person means, and not just hear what they say... Would she... think hard about what I said — in particular my concern that wearing the full veil was bound to make better relations between the two communities more difficult. It was such a visible statement of separation and of difference.

British MP Jack Straw on his approach to female constituents
who come to his office wearing the “full veil.”

Lancashire Telegraph, October 6, 2006.

*Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object's Loss —
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price
The Object Absolute — is nought —
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far —
Emily Dickinson*

This chapter aims to amplify and expand our understanding of Neshat's seminal *Women of Allah* series of photographs (1993-1997) by accounting for its relationship to particular strains within Western art history and visual culture of the last 200 years, and especially to American visual and discursive representations of Iranians in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. Although *Women of Allah* continues to be central to discussions of Neshat's artistic practice, to date, no one has extensively investigated the photographs' vivid fluency in Euro-American artistic and visual-cultural precedent, or their savvy marshalling of the topical debate within contemporary discourse concerning issues of Islam and gender — aspects of the photographs which, if accounted for, can help to make sense of their many complex, and often problematic, features.

Crucial throughout this analysis, therefore, are concepts of appropriation. This chapter contends that *Women of Allah* engages and appropriates representational tropes not only of Muslim women in European art history and visual culture, but also (and quite specifically) of Iran and Iranians in the U.S. media in the 1980s. Understanding *Women of Allah* as such an appropriative practice enables us to situate these works in a particular geographic site at a particular historical juncture — to ask how *Women of Allah* responded to the 1980s, what kinds of critiques of that moment it posed within the context of its American reception, and why revisiting that moment might still have been relevant in the 1990s. *Women of Allah* is responsive, that is to say, not merely to a longstanding “Western” penchant for representing “Muslim” women — a broad

argument that, on its own, reduces the complexity of these works' demands and fails to consider their contemporary significance — but also to the particular context of American visual, social, and political representations of, and dealings with, Iran in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Thus, Part One of this chapter considers *Women of Allah* as, to a certain extent, an outgrowth of New York-based appropriation art practices and discourses of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, however, although such practices and discourses formed an important part of the aesthetic context of Neshat's arrival to New York City following her cross-country move from California in 1982, the readings of *Women of Allah* offered in Part Two pose a significant departure from standard art-critical narratives both of appropriation art and of Neshat's series. While contextualizing *Women of Allah*'s response to representations of Iran and Iranians in the U.S. in the 1980s, Part Two examines the significance of these works' important revisions and modifications of their appropriative content. That neither the art-critical nor the scholarly literature on Neshat's photographs has yet situated *Women of Allah* in terms of the photographs' address to the visual and political encounters between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1980s — considering *Women of Allah* instead as responsive to Western representations of Muslim women more broadly — is perhaps revealing of the way that, even by the mid-1990s, when Neshat's series had begun to draw major art-critical attention, visual signifiers that had once been specific to representations of Iran's "Islamic fanaticism" had already become associated with more generalized fears of a global Islamic takeover. In appropriating particular decade-old representational tropes (as well as their vacillating significance in the 1990s and the present), *Women of Allah* underscores how such images continue to animate our perceptions and self-perceptions, proposing that the visual terms of the 1980s — as well as the vexed historical problems to which they alluded — merit revisiting in the present. Revising and reformulating the visual terms of those representations, *Women of Allah* poses a critique of American representations of, and political transactions with, the newly-formed Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1980s, staging the combative encounter between the two countries as one between an embodied (American) viewer and the (Iranian) woman in the *chador*. Ultimately, *Women of Allah* insists at once on recuperating historical memory while offering viewers alternative modes of engagement with cultural Others in their world.

PART ONE

I. Defining the *Women of Allah*

While Neshat showcased her incipient *Women of Allah* series in a number of group shows around the country in 1994, curators and critics truly began taking notice of her new work the following year, in response to the artist's solo show at New York City's Annina Nosei Gallery (September 30 – November 1, 1995), and to the photographs'

inclusion in two exhibition venues within the Venice Biennale.⁹⁸ By this point, Neshat had effectively abandoned sculpture and installation in favor of photography, and her latest photographs, while still overlain with Persian script and representing the artist in a *chador*, introduced an important, new element that would dramatically heighten their charge. This new work — complete with a provocative title apparently adapted from Minou Reeves’ recently published book, *Female Warriors of Allah*, on the role of women in Iran’s Islamic Revolution and under the country’s new regime — armed the women of Neshat’s photographs with guns, now associating them with militant Islam [figs. 31, 32, 2].⁹⁹ In so doing, the new photographs seemed explicitly to take up Reeves’ intriguing introductory question: “How can we explain the paradox of the woman who accepts the laws of the harem, yet is willing to march to war with a rifle slung across her black *chador*?”¹⁰⁰ However, whereas *Female Warriors of Allah* takes a decidedly critical posture toward the Islamic Republic, assuming a pro-Pahlavi and pro-Western bias both in its politics and its epistemological categories — the Islamic Revolution carried the country “back” to a “traditional” and indeed “medieval” state, the Pahlavi era had been “civilised,” “modern” and “advanced”¹⁰¹ — Neshat’s photographs adopt a far more ambiguous stance toward their subject.

By now, that ambiguity has resulted in nearly two decades of confusion, conflicting interpretations, and discordant readings of the photographs within the scholarship and art criticism. Indeed, from early on, the criticism was vexed with questions, and with no real consensus even as to the series’ main point. Is the subject of *Women of Allah* “the artist herself” — an example of “identity art,” and an earnest, if aesthetic, exploration of Neshat’s complex position as an Iranian woman residing in America in the post-revolutionary moment?¹⁰² Or is Neshat’s “self” in fact peripheral to the photographs’ real message, as in them the artist *performs* a position, actively and

⁹⁸ Select works from the series were shown in the “*Transculture*” section of the Biennale, curated by Dana Friis-Hansen and Fumio Nanjo, and in “*Campo*,” curated by Francisco Bonami.

⁹⁹ Minou Reeves, *Female Warriors of Allah: Women and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989). See footnote 134 below for clarification regarding Neshat’s potential appropriation of Reeves’ book title.

¹⁰⁰ Reeves, 2. From early on, both Neshat herself and her critics have either quoted or paraphrased Reeves’ question, suggesting that she might have been familiar with Reeves’ text by the time she began taking up issues of Muslim women’s militancy in her photographs, in 1993 (please refer to the concluding passages of this section, “Defining the *Women of Allah*,” for an elaboration of the different sub-categories within *Women of Allah*). Thus, an early press release for a small exhibition of *Women of Allah* at San Francisco’s Haines Gallery in 1994 was prefaced by Reeves’ quotation, suggesting that Neshat was likely familiar with the book and had read it by 1994. See also, Octavio Zaya, “Shirin Neshat,” *Flash Art* 27, no. 179 (November 1994): 84; and Neshat’s own statements in Shadi Sheybani, “Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 208.

¹⁰¹ Reeves, 3, 13.

¹⁰² See Amei Wallach, “Rejecting the Melting Pot: My Canvas, My Self; Shirin Neshat,” *New York Newsday*, February 23, 1994, 50-51, and “Shirin Neshat: Islamic Counterpoints,” *Art in America*, October 2001, 136-143 and 189; Barry Schwabsky, “Shirin Neshat: Annina Nosei Gallery,” *Artforum* (December 1995): 88; Jerry Saltz, “New Channels: Shirin Neshat and Doug Aitken,” *The Village Voice*, January 12, 1999, 113.

knowingly playing the part of a militant Muslim/Iranian woman? According to this latter strand of interpretation — the one privileged by the majority of the art criticism — the photographs function as a form of critique. However, in that case, do the photographs provide a postcolonial critique of Western assumptions and stereotypes concerning the presumed passivity of Muslim women,¹⁰³ or do they instead provide a Western secular-liberal feminist critique of Islam for its patriarchal oppression of women?¹⁰⁴ Alternately, one might ask, can the photographs manage simultaneously to critique erroneous *representations* of Islam and Muslim women *and* Muslim women's lived *realities*?

Finally, some critics are profoundly sceptical of Neshat's art, uncertain that *critique* properly describes the artist's achievement or even her motives, arguing instead that *Women of Allah* acritically panders to a Western audience eager to consume images of Muslim female victimization.¹⁰⁵

Whatever the critical position, the underlying assumption (or fear, as it were) is that, even as aesthetic works, the photographs describe *something* truthful about the vicissitudes of contemporary Muslim/Iranian women's experiences. Whether *Women of Allah* is assumed to address the women's plight against Western stereotypes and misrepresentations, or their plight against Islamic patriarchy, the photographs are persistently understood to be "about" the Muslim/Iranian woman. The difference between the two strands within the art criticism that view *Women of Allah* as critique lies in their apparently polarized approach to the photographs' content — their reading of the photographs as either "possess[ing] documentary value, providing a window onto the lives" of "women in the Middle East,"¹⁰⁶ or as illustrating the women's circumstances metaphorically. Thus, in an instance of the latter interpretation, *New York Times*' art critic Holland Cotter suggests of Neshat's photographs that they "seem to be symbolically placing political power in the hands of the kinds of veiled women who are automatically

¹⁰³ See Samar Bush, "Complicating the Veiled Iranian Woman: the work of Shirin Neshat and Shadi Ghadirian" (MA thesis, University of Connecticut, 2008); Martha Schwenderer, "Shirin Neshat: Annina Nosei Gallery," *The New Art Examiner* (December 1995), 33-34; Jamelie Hassan, *The Brilliance of Oranges: Shirin Neshat, Ghostwriter Project 1* (Toronto: Mercer Union, 1998), n.p.; Larson, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ See Paula Gustafson, "Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah," *Artichoke* (Spring 1998): 34-35; MacDonald, 322-344; Jan Avgikos, "Shirin Neshat," *Artforum* (January 2006): 220-221.

¹⁰⁵ Pepe Karmel, "Shirin Neshat," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1995, C27; Lindsey Moore, "Frayed Connections, Fraught Projections: The Troubling Work of Shirin Neshat," in *Women: A Cultural Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1-17; Mojgan Khosravi, "Shirin Neshat: A Contemporary Orientalist" (MA thesis, Georgia State University, 2011).

¹⁰⁶ The full passage, from a 2006 review of Neshat's art in *Artforum*, merits reading: "How many locations, scenes, and events in Neshat's work inform us about the actual texture of day-to-day life of women in the Middle East, whether from the perspective of an exile or of someone who has no choice but to remain? We can't help wondering how much in her art might possess documentary value, providing a window onto the lives of those to whom virtually all forms of self-expression are denied" (Avgikos, 220-221). See also art critic Peter Herbstreuth's comments concerning Neshat's photographs on view at the Venice Biennale: "[Shirin Neshat] is dealing with the way women in Iran are living today. And as an observer she reflects their roles" ("Venice: Transculture, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin," *Siksi* 3 [1995]: 54).

assumed by many Westerners to be oppressed victims of Islamic religious law, but who don't necessarily see themselves that way at all."¹⁰⁷ Whereas the documentary interpretation seems to take the works' aesthetic literally — understanding the women's frontal postures, the photographs' straightforward compositions and their black-and-white sheen as reflective of a "harsh" reality¹⁰⁸ — the emphasis in Cotter's reading is rather on staging and metaphor; the women are understood to perform a position — their gestures, props and physical comportment symbolic of Muslim women's strength and agency. Nevertheless, despite their vastly different interpretations of *Women of Allah's* content, there is significant slippage between the documentary and the metaphorical readings, both assuming that the series proposes to offer viewers truths about Muslim women — whether about the realities of their daily lives, or of their character. This tension, between *Women of Allah's* functioning as documentary or as metaphor, is pervasive throughout the art criticism, if to varying and occasionally widely contradictory ends. Thus, for example, at least one critic admits to having initially taken the *Women of Allah* photographs at face value, to having understood the women depicted truly to represent "Islamic terrorists."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, part of the difficulty *Women of Allah* has posed to interpretation stems from issues of medium, as photography has always turned on the tension between reality and its representation.

For her own part, Neshat remarks that "photography works best with my topic, conveying realism [and] immediacy" — adding to her description, however, photography's ability to express "a sense of drama."¹¹⁰ The binary plaguing the art criticism — between realism, on the one hand, and performance or metaphor, on the other — is, at least in Neshat's view, a non-problem; her photographs evoke *both* registers. In claiming that the major problem within the criticism is the polarity between truth and metaphor, I do not mean to suggest, however, that I think *Women of Allah* itself ever offers any sort of accurate description of Muslim/Iranian women; the art criticism that ponders the "documentary value" of Neshat's art fails more than any other account to take up the complex demands of this work. Rather, it is precisely the push and pull between realism and drama, or between the apparently documentary and the evidently metaphorical and staged, that should be understood to animate these works. This dialectic — the works' vacillation between "acting" as real, and realizing drama and metaphor — is central to how they function. Nevertheless, such tension certainly makes for a challenging read.

Looking to the artist's own claims, moreover, is not always helpful. Like most artists, Neshat offers varied descriptions and representations of her work, her contradictory statements about *Women of Allah* making it difficult to construct a unified picture of her intentions and often validating the critics' conflicting interpretations. A series of Neshat's illustrations of, and statements about, *Women of Allah* from the 1990s

¹⁰⁷ Holland Cotter, "What does Islam look like?," *The New York Times*, 23 February 2006, A36. See also Hamid Dabashi, "The Gun and the Gaze: Shirin Neshat's Photography" in *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* (Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1997), n.p.

¹⁰⁸ Laurie Attias, "Shirin Neshat," *Artnews* 97 (November 1998), 174.

¹⁰⁹ Igor Zabel, "Women in Black," *Art Journal* (Winter 2001): 25.

¹¹⁰ Sheybani, 205.

— while the artist was still formulating her project — reveal her alternating objectives. In her staging of the photograph that would later be titled *Identified* in the journal *New Observations* in 1995, the artist included a caption — “Shirin Neshat *Women of Allah Series*, B/W 1994. Place of Birth: Qazvin, Date of Birth: 1336, Mother’s Name: Mahin, Father’s Name: Ali, Gender: A Women [*sic*]” — that would seem to justify the identity art reading of her photographs.¹¹¹ Similarly, the issue dedicated to the topic “Identity” in the New York literary and visual arts quarterly *Grand Street*, quotes Neshat describing her production of *Women of Allah* as a form of personal inquiry, claiming that the series represented “my way of discovering and re-identifying with the new Iran.”¹¹² However, in the same issue of *Grand Street*, Neshat describes her photographs as also engaged in “shatter[ing] our stereotype of the typical Muslim woman as a passive and submissive victim,” now supporting the interpretation of her work as a form of postcolonial critique of representations of Muslim women.¹¹³ In a 1994 catalogue for an exhibition at the Bronx Museum of Art, Neshat offers further support for this reading, proposing that *Women of Allah* “may suggest some clarification of the misunderstanding of women, consistently being thought of as victims in the Middle East. I really feel that women are extremely powerful members of all kinds of Islamic communities. And my intention if anything is to reveal their [*sic*] power of these women through their literature, through their political activities, through their activism.”¹¹⁴ Yet at other times, Neshat equivocates on this latter point, suggesting her photographs have not to do with erroneous Western representations, but rather with Muslim women’s actual oppression, offering sweeping descriptions of the women in her photographs as representative “of all female Muslims who must adhere to religious codes and social mores,” and claiming that Muslim women are “forced to hide behind the veil.”¹¹⁵

Though perhaps contradictory, the artist’s descriptions of *Women of Allah* might help to underscore that different works within the series function in different ways. Whereas the art criticism often refers to *Women of Allah* as though the various works within the series add up to form a cohesive unit, unified in theme and sharing a singular, consistent strategy, *Women of Allah* was always in fact a work in progress in the years of its production (1993-1997), the series evolving throughout this period in diverse ways. In 1995, for example, Neshat had not yet decided how many editions of each photograph to

¹¹¹ Shirin Neshat, “Women of Allah,” *New Observations* 107 (New York: New Observations, Ltd., July 1995), 13. The caption provides, for the most part, a translation of the Persian script written upon the back of the figure’s/Neshat’s hand in the photograph; however, it does not seem to me self-evident that the caption provides this translation. See Chapter One for a description of *New Observations*, and for a treatment of Neshat’s involvement with this journal in 1988.

¹¹² Shirin Neshat, “Women of Allah: Secret Identities,” *Grand Street* 62 (Fall 1997): 145. Note, however, that Neshat consistently refers to the figure in her photographs (including when the figure is herself) as “the woman” or “the character” (see, for example, Neshat’s comments in Nabil, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” 11).

¹¹³ Shirin Neshat, “Women of Allah: Secret Identities,” 145.

¹¹⁴ Shirin Neshat, “Artist Interviews,” in *Beyond the Borders: Art by Recent Immigrants* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1994), 25-26.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Goodman, “Poetic Justice: Shirin Neshat Defends the Faith,” *Word Art* 16 (1998): 52.

produce, and had not yet standardized the photographs' sizing.¹¹⁶ Moreover, the fact that Neshat writes by hand upon each photograph results in each work's constituting a unique work of art, visibly distinct from other editions printed from the same negative. Some works, simply put, are superior to other editions of the "same" work, and comparison between earlier and later versions reveal a general fine-tuning of Neshat's handwriting upon the images — the lines of script becoming tighter, finer and, on the whole, more skilfully rendered as the years progressed — resulting, in the artworks executed latest in the series, in a dynamic and powerful interplay between the surface script and representational content of the photographs.¹¹⁷

The complete set of *Women of Allah* is typically understood to consist of the thirty-eight black and white photographs reproduced in the 1997 Turin catalogue, *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah*.¹¹⁸ Each photograph taken according to the artist's direction by various photographers over a period of five years, Neshat herself appears in as many as thirty-one of the photographs, mainly with her face in full or partial view, but also in cropped close-ups of body parts such as a single eye or a pair of hands or feet.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ See Shirin Neshat's letter to Elizabeth Fiore, director of the Annina Nosei Gallery, dated 9.8.1995, in which Neshat writes that the editioning of the photographs remained a matter to discuss and determine ("Shirin Neshat, Box 30, Folder 8: Shirin Neshat; show cards, bio, correspondence ½" in the Annina Nosei Gallery Archive).

¹¹⁷ See, for example, the announcement for Neshat's show at Haines Gallery in San Francisco, *Shirin Neshat: Unveiling* (January 4-February 10, 1996), which reproduces an early version of *I Am its Secret* ("Shirin Neshat, Box 30, Folder 8: Shirin Neshat; show cards, bio, correspondence ½" in the Annina Nosei Gallery Archive). Compared to the later version reproduced in the 1997 Turin *Women of Allah* catalogue, the handwriting in the earlier version of the work is thicker, and less seamlessly integrated into the composition of the figure's face.

¹¹⁸ *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* (Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1997), hereafter identified as the "Turin catalogue" so as to distinguish it from the Vancouver Artspeak Gallery exhibition catalogue, also from 1997 and titled *Shirin Neshat: "Women of Allah."* Unless otherwise indicated, this dissertation always refers to the photographs as they appear in the Turin catalogue. According to Gladstone Gallery, *Women of Allah* exists in two editions, distinguished by size: the larger, 'A' size, measures 40 x 60 inches, in an edition of five, while the smaller, 'B' size, measures 10 x 14 inches, in an edition of ten — totalling fifteen prints of each artwork (Personal conversation with Jessie Green, staff at Gladstone Gallery, which currently represents Neshat's art, 8.3.2009). (Viewed in person, the larger format is, predictably, much more powerful than the smaller, as the women depicted appear nearly life-sized.) Throughout 1993-1997, as Neshat was working on the series, however, she also exhibited other photographs as *Women of Allah* works. The Bronx Museum of the Arts catalogue, *Beyond the Borders: Art by Recent Immigrants*, reproduces one such work, p. 35, titled *Women of Allah: Martyrdom/Terrorism* (1993). See also the Annina Nosei Gallery Archive for slides and show cards of other photographs, clearly related both aesthetically and thematically to the works in the Turin catalogue, but ultimately excluded from it.

¹¹⁹ Neshat describes her working method as follows: "I develop the concepts, find the props and models, and hire photographers who are often my friends to handle the camera. We discuss the ideas in length [*sic*] beforehand, I make sketches of each frame as I am imagining them, then we take it from there and often improvise. I used to pose for the photos regularly but lately I am more comfortable in the background. I still don't handle the camera but am able to direct the photo-shoots easier" (Bertucci, 84).

Although weapons (or their ciphers, in the form of bullets) only appear in about half of the photographs in the series, Neshat describes *Women of Allah* as a whole as concerned with the issue of women and militancy in Iran during and subsequent to the 1978-79 Revolution.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, and contrary to the prevalent description of *Women of Allah* as a unified series with a cohesive set of aims, thematic and formal distinctions among the works suggest certain divisions within the series, each with its own particular set of concerns.

As discussed in Chapter One, the earliest artworks in the series (the first three reproduced in the 1997 Turin catalogue) technically predate *Women of Allah*, having already appeared in exhibitions at Exit Art and Franklin Furnace Gallery in 1992 and early 1993 [figs. 1, 15, 16, 21, 22]. Indeed, these works are occasionally considered distinct from *Women of Allah*, referred to as part of the *Unveiling* series, after the title of Neshat's solo exhibition at Franklin Furnace.¹²¹ Although these works exhibit most of the features associated with *Women of Allah* — that is, a solitary female figure in a black *chador*, viewed at close range while looking directly back at the viewer, with script written upon the photograph as though overlaying her skin — and although these works are among the handful from the series most often reproduced in the art criticism to stand in for the whole, they still lack that defining feature — the gun — that embellishes the photographs' with a provocative and threatening tinge of militancy.¹²²

Guns, in the form either of a small handgun or a Remington rifle, begin to appear in the series in 1994, and are included in all eight works produced that year. In all of these photographs, the ones I consider to form the core of the *Women of Allah* series, the woman either holds the gun in her hands (as in *Faceless, Rebellious Silence, Grace Under Duty* [fig. 31, 2]), or the gun rests across her wrists, still in direct contact with her skin (as in *Stories of Martyrdom #1* and *#2* [fig. 33]).

Many of the remaining works in the series — those which have occasionally been referred to as “extensions” of the *Women of Allah* project — digress in one significant way or another from the features described above.¹²³ In *Seeking Martyrdom #1* and *#2* (1995), the text is written on the background of the image rather than upon the woman's skin [fig. 34]. In four works from 1995, the woman wears a delicate, white floral *chador* in place of her “severe” black one, and a gun appears in only one of these works (the photograph, incidentally, in which the woman is represented lying down with her

¹²⁰ Zaya, “Shirin Neshat: Armed and Dangerous interviewed by Octavio Zaya,” *aRUDE* (Spring 1996): 54-55.

¹²¹ Neshat herself occasionally refers to these works as part of her *Unveiling* series (see Bertucci, 84, and Sheybani, 207-208). See also Paco Barragán, “Interview with Shirin Neshat,” *Arco Noticias* 11, (May 1998), 47.

¹²² Art critic Calvin Reid writes about the guns in *Women of Allah* that they “provide an irresistible intellectual and visual frisson” (Calvin Reid, “Shirin Neshat at Annina Nosei,” *Art in America* 84 [March 1996], 105).

¹²³ See Sheybani, 207-8. Sheybani suggests in this interview that Neshat “ha[s] done three major bodies of photographic work since 1993” (207); Neshat refers to the first as the *Unveiling* series, the second as *Women of Allah*, but does not name a third, although Sheybani describes six of Neshat's photographs shot in Iran as “an extension” of *Women of Allah* (208). In Octavio Zaya, “*Women of Allah: q+a shirin neshat*,” the artist refers to the same six photographs she had taken in Iran, as part of a “new series” (*Creative Camera* 342 [October 1996]: 18).

eyes closed), mollifying the sense of danger so necessary to the functioning of the core *Women of Allah* works [figs. 35 and 36].¹²⁴ Another group of photographs from 1995 represents Neshat, either alone or with her young son, wearing a plain, white *chador*; although the guns reappear in these works, they are moved to the edges of the photographic scenes where, again, they do not appear to constitute any immediate threat [fig. 37]. Script in these latter two groups of works from the series, moreover, plays a much less defining role than in the works from 1993 and 1994, a result of the more distant cropping of these photographs (there is simply less visible skin to work with), and in six of the photographs executed toward the end of 1995, there are no guns or script present at all [figs. 38-40]. Moreover, each of these six photographs — the only ones from the series shot in Iran — represents a group of figures ranging from five to seven women, diffusing the force of the one-to-one encounter staged in the other works. Lastly, the three photographs that close the series present a final significant departure from the principal *Women of Allah* works, introducing men into the photographs; these concluding works thus open *Women of Allah* onto a broader terrain of gender dynamics and male-female relations, foreshadowing Neshat's imminent turn to these issues in her video installations ([figs. 41 and 42]).¹²⁵

Although these various “extensions” of the *Women of Allah* photographs are rich and complex in their own right, this chapter refers predominantly to those photographs produced in 1993 and 1994 (as well as to a pair of later ones, *Speechless* and *Untitled*, from 1996, that return to the same set of conventions [figs. 43 and 44]), before shifting toward the chapter's conclusion to a close analysis of a single work from the series. These core *Women of Allah* works, this chapter contends, so captured the attention of critics when they emerged in the 1990s, not only because of their provocative and timely address to issues of women in Islam/Iran, but also because they were the most evocative, and the most appropriative, of the kinds of images that have been imprinted in the American national consciousness since the early 1980s, in the wake of Iran's Islamic Revolution. In homing in on such a limited range of artworks within *Women of Allah*, this chapter aims to consider how these works engaged and responded to their particular moment.

II. Issues of Appropriation

Although it has not yet been theorized in relation to Neshat's oeuvre, appropriation art, as well its critical reception-history, can provide a model for understanding the complex and ostensibly contradictory messages performed in and conveyed by *Women of Allah*. As an influential aesthetic practice developing in New

¹²⁴ Barry Schwabsky, “Shirin Neshat: Annina Nosei Gallery” in *Artforum* 34 (December 1995): 88.

¹²⁵ On these last “extensions” of the *Women of Allah* series, Neshat states: “... by bringing in the Muslim man, I wanted to open up the subject of the body in relation to gender, the male and female dynamic, and the family. Contrary to my earlier photos, these pieces intended to look at the character's private world rather than the public one. A woman in relation to her man, her child, and ultimately herself...” (Bertucci, 86).

York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, appropriation art was vocally championed by contemporary critics as a theoretically-driven, critical art practice opposed to the late capitalist commodity culture within which it functioned. In the context of the economic boom and cultural conservatism of the 1980s, which seemed to translate in the artworld to a conservative return to, and an indulgent market for, painting, the group of art critics largely associated with the journal *October* embraced appropriation artists for their strategic acts of “theft” and “piracy” — for their confiscation of imagery which they stole from an ever more saturated image-world.¹²⁶ Thus, for example, in her *Untitled Film Stills*, Cindy Sherman repeatedly photographed herself in staged scenes reminiscent of 1950s and 1960s Hollywood cinema, B-movies, and noir films [fig. 45]. In a related vein, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince took photographs of photographs by Walker Evans and Edward Weston (in Levine’s case), among others, and of Marlboro-brand cigarette advertisements (in Prince’s case), presenting them as their own work [fig. 46]. Within the poststructuralist framework of the *October* critics and theorists, appropriation art could only be interpreted as transgressive and oppositional, critical at once of contemporary culture and the modernist myths of the recent past. Thus the work of Sherman, Levine, and Prince, as well as that of the handful of other artists associated with appropriation, was described as pitted against modernism’s cult of authenticity and originality, deconstructing, in its apparently cool and detached analytical style, the notion of the unified self and the privileged author-genius celebrated within the institution of the museum and capitalist consumer culture.

While the account is a powerful one and has tended to prevail in understandings of appropriation art, it is insufficient — not least because of its all-encompassing scope, assimilating a diverse body of art into a single, theoretical framework. Thus, in his insistence, for example, that appropriation art shifts the viewer’s “attention and reading to the framing device,” depleting the artworks in question of any internal meaning, art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh refuses on theoretical grounds to consider the aesthetic operations performed within the artworks he analyzes.¹²⁷ More recently, in his consideration of the work of Sherrie Levine, art historian Howard Singerman has convincingly argued that, in the drive to make Levine’s art correspond to the critical ideologies it purportedly represented, the appropriation critics failed truly to *see* it — a charge that could easily be directed at much of Neshat’s critics as well. Ultimately, for Singerman, truly “seeing Sherrie Levine” involves acknowledging the embodiedness of

¹²⁶ For contemporary accounts of appropriation art, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* (September 1982): 44-56; Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977); Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88; Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” *October* 18 (Fall 1981): 47-66; Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86; Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2,” *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 58-80. For an excellent historiography of the 1980s cultural landscape and the support of appropriation art by the *October* group, see Howard Singerman, “Pictures and Positions in the 1980s,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

¹²⁷ Buchloh, 46.

looking, and therefore understanding her place, as well as that of the viewer, in a physical and affective relationship with the appropriated work of art.¹²⁸

This chapter argues for a similar kind of engagement with Neshat's *Women of Allah* — one that truly looks at and takes into account what lies within the frame of these photographs. Although the approach may seem self-evident — given how hyper-charged is Neshat's content, it would of course be absurd to suggest “shifting the viewer's attention to the framing device” — it is precisely because *Women of Allah* takes up the overdetermined trope of the veiled Muslim woman that most of its viewers and critics have also failed to see the work, relying instead on hasty assumptions about the series' ideological message and achievement. Nonetheless, the following analysis of *Women of Allah* does not dismiss out of hand the appropriation art-critical paradigm. Instead, this chapter aims to maintain a sense of *Women of Allah*'s criticality while supplementing that account by keeping in mind Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of appropriation as well — considering how that which is appropriated always at once refers back, to “other people's contexts... other people's intentions,” while also participating in and transforming the environment “in which it lives and takes shape.”¹²⁹

While Neshat's practice has not been considered specifically in terms of appropriation, some critics have acknowledged that *Women of Allah* appears to be in active dialogue with Orientalist art-historical and visual-cultural precedent. Critic and curator Octavio Zaya, one of Neshat's earliest supporters, thus noted early on:

[Neshat's photographs] confront and disclaim the colonial images of Islamic women as exotic possessions, erotic objects and submissive creatures which pervade western fictions; images which are still very much configured by the traditional distortions derived from Delacroix and Matisse as well as from well-known western media misrepresentations.¹³⁰

Similarly, Jamelie Hassan, curator of a 1996 exhibition of *Women of Allah* at the Mercer Union Center for Contemporary Art in Toronto, writes in her catalogue, “Neshat's use of the chador boldly confronts the stereotypes which circulate around images of the ‘oriental woman’ bereft of agency, dominated by patriarchal powers.”¹³¹ And, as discussed above, Neshat occasionally echoes such claims in her own statements about her work:

My overriding approach has always been to create a conceptual dialogue that visually identifies and explores some of the negative and stereotypical characterizations of Muslims, in particular women. The image of a group of veiled women sitting before European landscape painting [*sic*] [within the *Women of Allah* series]... is suggestive of a harem, which has captured the western colonial male's imagination since the Crusaders as some sort of an earthly paradise for the senses filled with exotic, subservient sexual objects. The wide range of women's facial expressions — defiance, sweetness, pensiveness, resignation, flirtation, anger, ennui — simultaneously make for a tapestry of

¹²⁸ Howard Singerman, “Seeing Sherrie Levine,” *October* 67 (Winter 1994): 78-107.

¹²⁹ Bakhtin, 294 and 272, respectively. Please refer to the introduction for a broader discussion of the relevance of Bakhtin's theories to the present reading of *Women of Allah*.

¹³⁰ Zaya, “Shirin Neshat: Armed and Dangerous interviewed by Octavio Zaya,” 54-55.

¹³¹ Hassan, n.p.

enduring human emotion and fracture the absurd uniformity projected onto Muslim women by the colonial gaze.¹³²

These characterizations of *Women of Allah* as a deconstructive project, critically reclaiming erroneous representations of Muslim/Oriental women in order to resist such stereotypes, situate Neshat's practice firmly within a trajectory influenced by appropriation art — one that, as opposed to Buchloh, however, views appropriation as “a distortion, not a negation of the prior semiotic assemblage. When successful it *maintains but shifts* the former connotations to create the new sign...”¹³³ Zaya's contention that *Women of Allah* “confronts and disclaims” longstanding stereotypes of Oriental women's passivity and eroticism, or Neshat's assertion that the eponymous “*Women of Allah*”¹³⁴ photographs in her series “identify” and “fracture” assumptions about Muslim women's character, both suggest that the photographs maintain, but re-orient, longstanding readings of the sign-language of Orientalist imagery [figs. 38-40].

In this formulation, the problem, which *Women of Allah*'s appropriations work to fix, is one of representation — or rather, of the *misrepresentation* of reality.¹³⁵ Thus, in evoking at once Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1834), as well as French colonial photographs modelled on the painting's precedent, Neshat's “*Women of Allah*” succinctly expose how deeply entrenched is the West's fascination with the harem while emphasizing the simulacral nature of its representations [see figs. 38-40, 47 and 48]. Meanwhile, in other works, Neshat seems to appropriate compositions of particular erotic colonial postcards, meeting the invasive gaze of the colonial photographer and his camera, as well as of the viewer, with the figure's gun, deconstructing “colonial images of Islamic women as exotic possessions, erotic objects and submissive creatures...” [figs. 31, 49].

Such accounting, however, while surely touching on an important aspect of *Women of Allah*, does not seem fully adequate either to the complexity and range, or the functioning of, appropriation in this series. Although I might agree with Neshat that the three “*Women of Allah*” photographs work to refuse the colonial harem fantasy, I am hesitant to settle on critique and resignification as the series' ultimate achievement.

¹³² Sheybani, 208-9.

¹³³ Robert Nelson, “Appropriation,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 119, my italics.

¹³⁴ I refer to these three photographs as “*Women of Allah*” — in quotation marks — in order to distinguish them from the series as a whole.

¹³⁵ *Women of Allah* thus participates in the postcolonial debate on European representations of the colonized launched by Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism*. In the introduction to his text, Said writes: “My analysis of the Orientalist text... places emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations *as representations*, not as ‘natural’ depictions of the Orient. This evidence is found just as prominently in the so-called truthful text (histories, philological analyses, political treatises) as in the avowedly artistic (i.e., openly imaginative) text. The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original.... I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not ‘truth’ but representations” (Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Vintage Books, 1979], 21, italics in the original).

Although the women in the photographs carry guns, their expressions are too deadpan, too ambiguous, to identify critical aggression as their definitive aim. Moreover, such an interpretation fails to consider Neshat's appropriations of "the photojournalistic images that I have been surrounded by" — images in which the women's guns act not merely as symbols of their strength and their rejection of Western fictions, but rather as very concrete and real killing instruments [see, for example, fig. 50].¹³⁶ While part of the accomplishment of *Women of Allah* may be in "confront[ing] and disclaim[ing]" the way such images function in the media as representative of all Muslim women, what remains to be considered is how *Women of Allah* also importantly revises and modifies this media imagery — and to what ends.

To which discursive and representational tropes of the 1980s and 1990s do the *Women of Allah* photographs repeatedly turn? What imagery does *Women of Allah* appropriate, and how does Neshat make these appropriations her "own"?¹³⁷ How do realism, immediacy, and drama work in these photographs, and what role does appropriation play in that work? These are some of the questions motivating this chapter, and which Part Two will investigate further. Taking up such questions might help direct viewers away from the narrow reading of *Women of Allah* as "about" the Muslim/Iranian woman, and toward different sets of considerations — considerations regarding at once perceptions and representations of Iran and Iranians in the U.S. in the 1980s, and U.S.-Iranian political relations during this moment. In its appropriations of representational tropes of the 1980s, *Women of Allah* asks viewers to revisit a particular historical moment, and to consider its extended consequences in the present. Recuperating historical memory through embodied experience — claiming that history and its representations continue to animate viewers' perceptions and fears of Iranians/Muslims today — *Women of Allah* ultimately proposes new meanings and values, inclining viewers' bodies toward new encounters with Iranians and Muslims in the future.

¹³⁶ Francine Birbragher, "Shirin Neshat," *Art Nexus* 2, no. 50 (2003), 90. The guns in Neshat's photographs succinctly coalesce the dialectic of realism/metaphor, acting — depending on the argument and approach of the particular art critic — either as (metaphorical) prop or (real) threat. According to critic Laurie Attias, for example, the guns function as "fierce symbols of hatred and fear... represent[ing] both the overwhelming weight of the women's imposed silence and the explosive force and vitality lying beneath that silence" (Attias, 174). By contrast, for art critic Igor Zabel, who admits in his article on *Women of Allah* that upon first seeing the photographs, his initial reaction was that he "was look at an Islamic terrorist," the guns in the works behaved as real weapons (Zabel, 25).

¹³⁷ Bakhtin writes: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language..., but rather exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (293-294). The title of this chapter, an allusion to the title of Delacroix's painting, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, intends to highlight Neshat's act of appropriation and revision in *Women of Allah*, her making the image her own.

PART TWO

I. *Women of Allah* in context (1) — the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s

If 19th- and 20th-century French colonial representations of Algerian women can be considered relevant to an understanding of *Women of Allah*, they are only in the most general sense. More revelatory is how the series, mobilizing a contemporary, largely New York-based, visual art language, actively engages representations of Iranians in the U.S. media since late 1979. Iran's Islamic Revolution and the ensuing "Iranian Hostage Crisis" — the 444-day militant student takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, when 52 Americans were kept hostage (November 4, 1979 – January 20, 1981) — and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) were the contemporary events framing and circumscribing American perceptions of Iran throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, forming the immediate political and historical backdrop to Neshat's practice.

Thus, when Neshat describes her photographic project in *Women of Allah* as influenced by photojournalistic imagery, she refers in part to the "images of women, rifles at their sides... from pictures she had collected from newspapers during the Iran/Iraq war," and to the reports on American television news during the same period, showing her how "the daily lives of women in her homeland [were] diametrically altered from the Iran she had known before":¹³⁸

'Beautiful women'... 'wrapped in chadors, with *huge* machine guns in their hands. Brilliant, shocking, amazingly contradictory images.' 'They compelled me,' she said of these photographs that inevitably shaped her reading of women on her visit to Iran, 'to deeply investigate these ideas.'¹³⁹

After Khomeini called for military training for women in March 1986, at a ceremony marking Women's Day in Iran, the American media was increasingly fascinated and disturbed by such apparently "contradictory images" of women arming themselves in support of a revolution that oppressed them. Documentary photographs, such as that of a group of women wearing the *chador* and holding handguns during a training exercise at a camp northeast of Tehran, printed in a 1987 issue of *Time*, were not uncommon in this period, reinforcing the growing conflation between Muslim veiling and militancy [fig. 50].¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Birbragher, 90, and Goldberg, 66, respectively.

¹³⁹ Goldberg, 66, italics in the original.

¹⁴⁰ In *Female Warriors of Allah*, Reeves reproduces two more such photographs. One, like the image in *Time*, represents a file of women armed with semi-automatics marching at an Iranian military camp [fig. 51]. The other is more unusual in that it represents a single woman rather than a mass of figures [fig. 52]. As Dadi claims, "[m]edia and photojournalists from the late 1970s onward have frequently depicted endless masses of Iranian women, covered in black chador [*sic*], participating in the revolution" ("Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," 126). In this second image in Reeves' book, the woman points her handgun just to the right of center of the photograph; although the similarity between this photograph and Neshat's *Faceless* [fig. 31] and *Untitled* [fig. 53] bears mentioning, the artworks differ enough from the documentary photograph that I am hesitant to suggest the artist had this particular image in mind when producing her work.

Nevertheless, while *Women of Allah* seems explicitly to refer to representations of militant revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iranian women, I want to propose that some of the photographs in the series — those I refer to in Part One as “the core” *Women of Allah* works — are responsive to *other* discourses and representations of Iran in this moment as well. Far more than the 1978-79 revolution or the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian hostage crisis defined Iran’s presence in the U.S. media in the early 1980s, hardening American public opinion against Iran, the event itself shaping the United States’ relations with the country ever since. If the notion of female militant revolutionaries was perplexing to Western sensibilities, in the 1980s the image still remained relatively distant and remote. The hostage crisis, by contrast, directly affected American lives — both those of the diplomats and staff seized within the embassy compound, and those of the Americans at home watching the drama unfold through relentless television reporting.¹⁴¹ According to one analyst, the hostage crisis formed a frightening “new American experience” — that of the unrelenting televisual image of chanting Iranian marchers, parading blindfolded hostages in front of the news camera while “crying a fevered ill will toward the United States.”¹⁴² During this moment, the image of one Iranian in particular — that of “the Ayatollah” Khomeini — emerged out of the crowd as the face of Iran’s Islamic extremism and fanatical opposition to the press.

In the passages that follow, I provide a brief sketch of the spectacular media event that was the hostage ordeal, as well as of the problematic communications between the U.S. and Iran’s fledgling government in this moment, in order to lay the foundations for this chapter’s concluding analyses of *Women of Allah* and, in particular, of *Faceless*.

In October 1979, President Carter permitted the exiled Mohammad Reza Shah into the U.S. from his temporary hideaway in Mexico to be treated for lymphatic cancer in a New York City hospital, prompting fury in the Islamic Republic, as well as the fear that the U.S. would attempt to reinstate the Shah in Iran.¹⁴³ Although Khomeini had purportedly not been aware of the plan concocted by a group of Islamist students to take the U.S. diplomats at the embassy hostage, he soon saw how useful the situation could be for his campaign and made it his own cause célèbre. Khomeini fuelled revolutionary hatred of America, referring to the embassy as “a nest of spies” and “a center of intrigue,” and calling on Iranian revolutionaries to take up arms in order to confront “the world’s biggest satanic power, the United States.”¹⁴⁴ According to William O. Beeman, linguistic anthropologist and scholar of political discourse between Iran and the U.S., Khomeini’s

¹⁴¹ Indeed, according to one analyst, “[i]f Vietnam was the nation’s first television war, the ordeal of the Tehran embassy was the first televised international crisis” (Don Oberdorfer, “Why the Hostage Crisis Held Us All Hostage,” *The Washington Post*, Sunday, February 1, 1981; Outlook; C2).

¹⁴² Boyer, (Untitled Report), *The Associated Press*, November 29, 1979, n.p.

¹⁴³ As Mohammad Reza Shah had kept his disease secret from the nation, Iranians were suspicious of the claim. Moreover, the fear of deception was not entirely ungrounded; Iranians had not forgotten about the United States’ C.I.A. staged *coup* in 1953 that overthrew Iran’s democratically elected leader, Mohammad Mossadegh, in order to reinstate the Shah.

¹⁴⁴ See the article “Khomeini: Arm nation against U.S.,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 1979, 1.

polarizing rhetoric, while galvanizing support for his Islamist cause within Iran,¹⁴⁵ served to make direct communication between Iranian and U.S. officials virtually impossible, as no one wanted to risk being viewed as complicit with the Americans.¹⁴⁶ Thus, Khomeini refused to speak to Attorney General Ramsey Clark and former Foreign Service Officer William Miller, whom Carter had dispatched to meet the leader.¹⁴⁷

The United States, for its own part, while demanding the hostages' return, refused to negotiate with Iran, partly, Beeman writes, "because they did not want to set Iran, an 'outlaw nation,' in a relationship of seeming equality with the United States."¹⁴⁸ Rather than negotiate or compromise, the U.S. placed economic and military sanctions on the country. When those did not succeed, the military sent in the failed mission, "Operation Eagle Claw," to Iran to rescue hostages.¹⁴⁹ By April 1980, Carter expelled Iranian diplomats from five U.S. cities and Washington, D.C., and imposed an economic embargo on Iran. As a result of these events during the hostage affair, the U.S. and Iran became locked into what Beeman describes as their "dysfunctional discourse situation" with one another — the situation within which communications between the two governments are characterized by accusations and suspicion, threats and political maneuvering, conveyed through the mediated channels.¹⁵⁰

In November 1979, just two weeks after the embassy takeover had begun, the revolutionary regime invited U.S. journalists, many of whom had been expelled from the country over the summer, back into Iran, calling upon the press, and in particular the U.S. television networks, to mediate communications between the Iranian and U.S. governments and to give better coverage to Iran's demand for the return of the Shah. Needless to say, the press was more than willing to oblige and American audiences were eager and impassioned consumers of the fare. Indeed, media coverage of the hostage ordeal was unremitting. NBC news executive Edward Planer referred to the situation as, "[t]he only story going."¹⁵¹ ABC, NBC and CBS all took more than twenty staff members

¹⁴⁵ Indeed, Beeman claims that it was through his eventual embrace of the hostage crisis that Khomeini was able to gain control over the revolution and establish the Islamic Republic. See William O. Beeman, *The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullah': How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 139.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴⁷ John Skow, "The Long Ordeal of the Hostages," *Time*, January, 26, 1981, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Beeman, *The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullah'*, 29. Throughout 1980, Khomeini continued to iterate the new regime's conditions for the hostages' release, demanding the return to Iran of the Shah's fortune, the unfreezing of Iranian assets, cancellations of U.S. claims against Iran, and a pledge of non-interference (Skow, 21).

¹⁴⁹ On April 25, 1980, President Carter had to explain to the American public that the raid, secret until then, had been aborted, due largely to the equipment failure of three of the eight helicopters in the mission — a humiliating defeat for the country. Worse still, in the process, eight U.S. servicemen were killed in a helicopter crash in the desert; *Time* described the dysfunctional negotiations between the U.S. and Iran over the return of the bodies as "parodying in a grisly way the endless dreary bickering, now six months stale, over the release of the hostages themselves" (Skow, 21).

¹⁵⁰ Beeman, *The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullah'*, 35.

¹⁵¹ Boyer, n.p.

to Tehran — more than they used to cover even the Vietnam war — each network boasting correspondents on the scene and airing nighttime specials with live, on-the-spot reporting.¹⁵² According to *Time*, representation of the embassy takeover was “dominated by chanting marchers, flag burnings and the like...”¹⁵³ With each news outlet scrambling for the biggest draw and the most dramatic stories, there was a dearth of actual contextualizing reportage in both print and television news, the press focusing either on the fist-shaking demonstrators outside of the embassy, or on the plight of the hostages’ and their families at home, leaving out for the most part discussion of the political and historical circumstances that precipitated the event in the first place, and that made its resolution so difficult.¹⁵⁴ Many Americans, moreover, “completely identified their country’s fate with that of the hostages,” a sentiment ABC fully tapped into and cultivated with its series of nightly specials on Iran, dramatically titled, “America Held Hostage.”¹⁵⁵

Although described in the press itself as “blissfully ignorant of non-Muslim ways,” Khomeini was in fact highly savvy in his manipulation of the U.S. media, granting interviews to correspondents from the three major American networks after having refused correspondence with U.S. government officials.¹⁵⁶ Television critic Tom Shales wrote that Khomeini had “the world by the networks,” Iran’s emerging leader showing how the regime could control the news, allowing only pre-approved questions and demanding the networks not to air their reports until prime time.¹⁵⁷ Thus, in the context of this rift in communication between the two nations, journalists, wrote *Time*, became “conduits for semi-official exchanges... and a valuable source of information for the U.S. government.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² “Press: Tehran’s Reluctant Diplomats: Correspondents in Iran sift conflicting signals,” *Time*, December 3, 1979, 64.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ One study of the evening news networks revealed just how skewed reporting of the event was; in ten sample periods over eight months, the networks beamed coverage of chanting Iranian demonstrators outside the embassy on sixty occasions, “compared to only three interviews with unofficial, non-demonstrating Iranians who might have explained what the crowds were screaming about” (Oberdorfer, C2). In the two weeks from January 16, 1981, to January 29, 1981, leading up to and after the conclusion of the ordeal, the three major networks provided between twelve and twenty-five hours of additional reporting *each* to the situation, with coverage of the hostages’ return “attract[ing] audience ratings comparable to, and sometimes larger than, those for popular regularly scheduled prime-time shows” (Tony Schwartz, “Focus of TV Networks on Drama of the Hostages’ Release,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 1981, B19).

¹⁵⁵ Oberdorfer, C2. For some, the identification was “intense and personal,” the article continues, “[telling] members of hostage families, that they were unable to sleep well as they tossed at night worrying about what would happen next” (ibid., C2). See also John Maclean, “America Under the Gun,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1979, B1, and especially the accompanying illustration [fig. 54].

¹⁵⁶ “Index,” *Time*, January 7, 1980, 3.

¹⁵⁷ “Press: Tehran’s Reluctant Diplomats,” 64.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

Due to his show's known popularity, Mike Wallace of CBS's *60 Minutes* was the first American reporter allowed to interview the leader since the ordeal of the hostages began. As a result, over 65 million viewers watched *60 Minutes* on the night of November 18, 1979, and Americans were able to see up close and directly in their living rooms the face that would seize their attention for so many months.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, what interests me is the overdetermined attention given to how Khomeini looked — his face and facial expressions — both in the Wallace interview and in print representations of the leader during and subsequent to this moment. Repeatedly throughout the interview, the camera lingered on Khomeini's face, viewed at close range. Although his eyes never met the camera's, Khomeini's gaze remained steady and composed as he listened to the interviewer. Thus, according to the Associated Press, throughout the interview the leader was "grim-faced... rigid and showed little feeling..."¹⁶⁰ *The Washington Post* echoed the description, writing that, "his face was so aloof, distracted and implacable, that he almost could have been mistaken for a still photograph of himself."¹⁶¹

Less than two months later and to great controversy, *Time* elected Khomeini 1979's "Man of the Year," Iran's new political leader beating out Pope John Paul II and Margaret Thatcher, among other contenders for the position. The cover image of the Imam, from a painting by one Brad Holland, seemed to capture the expression of fierce determination attributed to him by the press [fig. 55]. For weeks, angry readers sent in scathing letters to the editor; *Time*'s gesture was "disgusting," "treason[ous]," "an insult to the people of the U.S. and to the hostages."¹⁶² Some readers acerbically applauded the decision, one adding the grim caveat however that "Khomeini accomplished what no politician or preacher in the U.S. could do. He aroused and unified our nation."¹⁶³ Another reader zoomed in on the cover image itself and on its "'portrait' of Khomeini, complete with reddened eyes and baleful glare," attacking *Time* for sensationalistically cultivating American's hostility and prejudice.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, from 1979 on, and through the 1980's, Khomeini's eyes — his "resolute look"¹⁶⁵ and his "glowering, implacable" and "vengeful scowl"¹⁶⁶ — served in the American imaginary as the embodiment of evil and icon of Iranian fanaticism.¹⁶⁷

¹⁵⁹ Tom Shales, "'Forgive Me, Imam': Scenes of the Ayatollah Interviews; Khomeini on Camera; How the Networks Queued Up in Qom," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1979, E1.

¹⁶⁰ "Khomeini Grants Interviews to Network," *The Associated Press*, November 18, 1979.

¹⁶¹ Shales, E1.

¹⁶² First two quotes from "Letters," *Time*, January 21, 1980, 10; second two quotes from "Letters," *Time*, January 14, 1980, 4.

¹⁶³ "Letters," *Time*, January 21, 1980, 10.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. Inside the "Man of the Year" publication, a photograph of the Imam, dressed in his characteristic black robe and turban, looms over the first two pages of the issue's main article [fig. 56]. As did the issue's cover image and this reader's comment, the article closed in on Khomeini's eyes: according to the article, the eyes were "hooded," and they "glare[d] out... balefully from beneath his black turban" ("Man of the Year: The Mystic who Lit the Fires of Hatred," *Time*, January 7, 1980, 9).

¹⁶⁵ The description appears in the caption to a photograph of Khomeini accompanying the article, "Iran: On the Brink of Civil War," *Time*, February 19, 1979, 31 [fig. 57].

¹⁶⁶ Harry Anderson, "The End of the Khomeini Era," *Newsweek*, June 12, 1989, 40.

These eyes, moreover, represented the derangement of an entire people seized by an Islamic craze that led them to support a regime predicated on the renunciation of modernity for a retreat into irrationality. “Iran seems a society possessed,” wrote *The New York Times* in 1984.¹⁶⁸ How else to understand a nation sending young boys, aged 12-17, to the war front, or the families boasting their “martyred” sons? Such people displayed “a kind of zealotry in pursuit of their revolution... hard for the Western mind to comprehend.”¹⁶⁹

By the mid-1990s, Khomeini’s eyes had become so seared into the national imaginary and had for so long represented Iran’s Islamic zealotry that the image of his eyes alone could be called upon to function as a powerful, fear-provoking symbol. Thus, in a 1996 article pondering the Islamic menace threatening the world-stage, the image used to represent that threat was none other than that of Khomeini’s eyes, viewed up close and isolated from his face [fig. 59]. By this point, however, those eyes represented not merely Iran’s revolutionary fanaticism, but that of “Islam” as a whole — now standing for, and effectively galvanizing fear of, a global Islamic takeover.¹⁷⁰

Returning, however, to the moment that gave rise to this fear of a broader, transnational Islamic terror aimed at overtaking the world, the point remains to be made that the hostage crisis was heavily a *media* affair, and predominantly a visual one at that — one in which images, slogans, and “newspaper diplomacy” replaced actual dialogue and face-to-face encounters between government officials and other political actors who might have aided the situation.¹⁷¹ Where dialogue between the two nations took place, it was always mediated, whether by the television networks and print media, or, at the end of the crisis, through the arbitration of the Algerian intermediaries who eventually succeeded in brokering a deal between Iran and the U.S.¹⁷² Relations between these two

¹⁶⁷ See also, Larry Martz, Gloria Borger, Michael Reese, Milan J. Kubic, Phyllis Malamud, Jerry Buckley, Susan Agrest, and Deborah Witherspoon, “The Limits of Power: Ten Years that Shook America: The Seventies,” *Newsweek*, November 19, 1979, 86 (with an accompanying photograph illustrating Khomeini’s scowl); and Mike Theodoulou, “US Steals Hearts from the Mullahs,” *The Observer*, June 25, 1995, 16. Responding to another *Time* cover image of Khomeini, a reader wrote in [fig. 58]: “If I were to paint a picture of the devil, I would use the eyes of Ayatullah Khomeini. They are cold, calculating, cruel, cunning, void of love and honor. I’ll take a big toothy smile any day to this man’s hard expressionless stare” (“Letters,” *Time*, March 5, 1979, 4).

¹⁶⁸ Terence Smith, “Iran: Five Years of Fanaticism,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 1984, Section 6, 21.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Elaine Sciolino, “Seeing Green: The Red Menace is Gone. But Here’s Islam,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 1996, Section 4, 1. See also *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*, in which political scientist Vali Nasr claims that Khomeini’s “glowering visage became the virtual face of Islam in Western popular culture,” “inculcat[ing] fear and distrust toward Islam in the West” ([New York: W.W. Norton, 2006], 138).

¹⁷¹ “Press: Tehran’s Reluctant Diplomats,” 64.

¹⁷² In November 1980, the two sides agreed to negotiate with an Algerian team under Foreign Minister Mohammed Benyahia. Reflecting later on those final months of the hostage ordeal, Carter recalled the painfully slow back-and-forth of the Algerian negotiations, in which questions, proposals, and counterproposals had to be translated from English to French to Persian and back;

countries have remained severed and hostile ever since the hostage crisis, to the detriment of both.¹⁷³ And thus, the “grotesque ritual of vengeance, frustration and mutual incomprehension” — words used to represent relations between Iran and the U.S. during the hostage crisis — continues to play itself out, the ritual having now endured over thirty years.¹⁷⁴

II. Women of Allah in context (2) — contemporary art and the return gaze

While *Women of Allah* is clearly in dialogue with images of Iranian women disseminated in the Western media following the Islamic Revolution, this study contends that the photographs’ gendered and iconographic terms are by no means precise. Pairing its appropriation of the image of the veiled Iranian woman with that of “the Ayatollah,” *Women of Allah* evokes an imagined conflation that the cover of *Life*’s January 1980 issue renders more explicit [fig. 60]. In the *Life* photograph, an Iranian woman in a black *chador* stands against a giant poster of Khomeini. Framing the woman so that her body fits within the outline of his body, and so that the contours of her veil align with those of his dark cloak behind her, the photograph visually elides the two figures, situating the woman as the leader’s progeny and disciple. Although the image crops the woman’s body at about her elbows, its point of view from below positions her so that she, like he, seems to loom over the viewer. Khomeini’s arms upraised, hers held down, his gaze directed out to the right, hers ahead and perhaps (?) looking through her dark sunglasses to the camera and *Life*’s reader — the two figures are complementary. The woman functions, in the context of the image, as the “real” human agent in front of the symbolic presence behind her — as the figure capable of responding to “Khomeini’s fierce outcry against America.”

Drawing out the solitary figure from the mass, situating her in a bare and ascetic setting, and, above all, dramatizing the “baleful glare” of her eyes, *Women of Allah* summons the figure that so commanded the American imaginary in the early 1980s and into the 1990s, pairing its appropriation of the iconography of Khomeini’s representation with that of the militant Iranian woman [figs. 30, 2, and compare figs. 20, 53, 55]. Thus, while the emphasis on women’s eyes in *Women of Allah* thematizes and responds to the Western scopic intrusion into Muslim societies in the last two centuries, it also serves to conjure and allude to Khomeini — invoking the cultural ethos of fear and hatred encouraged by his image, and in particular, by his eyes.

thus: “The Iranians, who spoke Persian, would talk only with the Algerians, who spoke French. Any question or proposal of mine had to be translated twice as it went from Washington to Algiers to Tehran; the answers and counterproposals had to come back over the same slow route” (Jimmy Carter, “444 Days of Agony: Keeping Faith: Part II,” *Time*, October 18, 1982), 64.

¹⁷³ Beeman enumerates on some of these hostilities, including, on the United States’ side, support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, over twenty years of sanctions on Iran, and President Bush’s characterization of Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil”, and on the Iranian side (though from the U.S.’ perspective), Iran’s support of terrorism, its treatment of women and minorities, and its aim for nuclear capability (*The ‘Great Satan’ vs. the ‘Mad Mullah’*, 130-162).

¹⁷⁴ Skow, 24.

In appropriating those eyes, Neshat's photographs draw on the way in which they consolidated the derangement and violent fanaticism (first) of Iranians, and (then) of Islam and Muslims more broadly, suggesting that the sentiments pervading the nation during the hostage crisis of 1979-81 continue to animate viewers' interactions with Iranians and Muslims in the present. Pairing those eyes with the body of the veiled, Iranian woman, *Women of Allah* provides a commentary on the contemporary social context — a context within which, the photographs suggest, the radical politics and actions of the few are taken to encompass the customary or religious practices of the many. Within such a context, *Women of Allah* proposes, a woman's *chador* is invariably linked to the symbolism of Khomeini's eyes or to a gun.

If the link between *Women of Allah* and representations of Khomeini has not yet been noted in the criticism, what is more surprising is that few of *Women of Allah*'s commentators have ever noted or interpreted the fact that the figures in the photographs consistently *look straight out of the image and at the viewer* — a feature that also clearly revises the direction of Khomeini's gaze in an important way. In *Women of Allah*, the figure's look is, admittedly, "confrontational" according to the literature, but analysis of the significance of the confrontation is routinely passed over in order to make claims about the artwork's ideological stance.¹⁷⁵ Thus, while Hamid Dabashi, scholar of Iranian history and politics, and early supporter of Neshat's art, is one of the few to consider the figures' "re-turning gaze," his analysis fails to consider the implications of that gaze:

... [M]ocking, ever so seductively, both the patriarchal and the colonial gaze [is] among the urgent energies that animate the postmodernity of [Neshat's] photographic visions. The intermediary site between patriarchy and coloniality is central to Shirin Neshat's re-turning gaze. With one singular gaze, she transfixes the colonial and the patriarchal by pitting them against each other. The veil from behind which she looks back is not just the patriarchal imposition as a guard against modernity but is equally the colonial gaze which by exporting that modernity turned her into an object of desire, an odalisque of dangerous sensuality.¹⁷⁶

In Dabashi's postcolonial analysis, the figures' return gaze somehow bypasses the viewer to "look" (mockingly, seductively, critically, and, ultimately, *symbolically*) at the patriarchal forces — Western imperialism and Muslim hierarchy — that historically have contributed to Muslim/Iranian women's subjection.

Similarly, while pondering *Faceless*, art historian Nina Cichocki poses the following series of rhetorical questions [fig. 31]:

Does the title refer to the many unknown, and thus faceless, women who perished fighting for the cause of Islam? Does it refer to the fact that for most Westerners all women in a *chador* are reduced to the faceless cliché of the

¹⁷⁵ Hassan, Schwenderer, Reid, Jenni Sorkin ("Veiled Truths," *Art Monthly* no. 230 [October 1999], 26-27), and Gustafson all raise this point.

¹⁷⁶ Hamid Dabashi, "The Gun and the Gaze" in *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* (Turin: Marco Noire Editore), n.p.

terrorist? Or, should we take it literally, that is, referring to the obliteration of the woman's features by the gun?¹⁷⁷

As in Dabashi's reading, Cichocki's interpretation remains within the realm of symbol and metaphor. Failing to assess the "literal" register of the figure's look, the art historian does not even consider whether the photograph's title might not also refer to the viewer — to the viewer, that is, whose *own* face could so easily be obliterated by the quick pull of a trigger, the photographic subject herself inflicting anonymity on the same person who had reduced *her* to a "faceless cliché."

In her master's thesis on *Women of Allah*, curator of Islamic art at the Brooklyn Museum, Ladan Akbarnia, brings readers closest to an understanding of the effect of viewing Neshat's photographs, beginning her essay with an evocative description of *Speechless* [fig. 43]:

A solemn face is watching you. A sober, serious (tired? bored? sad? mad?) face sees you, *she* watches you through this face, she the subject (object), with one eye gazing intently at you. Through her veil — the words that cover all orifices but an eye, the *chador* that conceals the rest of her body — through the photograph, looking your way... With this face she faces you, the viewer who regards her there before you. She confronts you and you can't loosen the grip of her simultaneously blank and loaded gaze, because she exists in the photograph, and the photograph hangs 64 by 48 inches large, *in your face*.¹⁷⁸

Unlike other critics and art historians, Akbarnia recognizes the importance of the figure's outward gaze, claiming that the figure in *Speechless* directly confronts the viewer with her gaze.¹⁷⁹ However, even Akbarnia, who so vividly describes the viewer-directedness of *Speechless*, does not pursue the significant implications of the narrative she presents, instead using her descriptions as a hook to draw the reader in, her text quickly moving on to examine *Women of Allah*'s investigation of gender politics in post-revolutionary Iran more broadly.

This refusal to see the viewer as part of the work in the art critics' and historians' descriptions is symptomatic of a broader inability to understand veiled, Muslim women outside of the debate on Islamic oppression. Rather than understand meaning in *Women of Allah* as multi-dimensional, dynamic and dialogical, the scholarship and art criticism persist in reading the photographs hermetically, as "about" the vicissitudes of the Muslim female experience. Thus, in one art critic's assessment, "[a]lthough she has lived in N.Y.

¹⁷⁷ Nina Cichocki, "Veils, Poems, Guns, and Martyrs: Four Themes of Muslim Women's Experiences in Shirin Neshat's Photographic Work," in *Thirdspace* 4, no. 1 (November 2004), <http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/view/cichocki/161>.

¹⁷⁸ Ladan Akbarnia, "Speaking through the Veil: Reading Language and Culture in the Photographs of Shirin Neshat," (MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), 2, italics in the original.

¹⁷⁹ Indeed, nearly every other photograph in *Women of Allah* performs in this way; certainly the majority of those showing the figure's face, but even those that do not, as in *Guardians of the Revolution* or *Stories of Martyrdom* (figs. 32 and 33), where the photographs' compositions nevertheless emphasize the figure's orientation toward the viewer.

for 23 years, Neshat finds herself unable to make work about American culture.”¹⁸⁰ Such a comment fails to see how *Women of Allah* relates to American media representations of Iran and Iranians. Most of all, however, such a comment fails to consider how, in systematically orienting itself toward viewers, *Women of Allah* insistently brings viewers into the fold of the artwork, incorporating them into its network of meaning, inviting them to engage.

Thus, even as *Women of Allah* appropriates documentary images — of armed Iranian women or of Khomeini and his “resolute look” — the figures’ direct stares and guns also respond to, and firmly plant *Women of Allah*’s stake in, the contemporary art-historical traditions in which Neshat became versed as an art student at U.C. Berkeley and a working artist in New York City. While the previous chapter proposed understanding Neshat’s photographs in the 1993 Franklin Furnace *Unveiling* exhibition as derived from Minimalist sculptural precedent, and while this chapter began by offering appropriation art as another crucial influence, *Women of Allah* also invokes another New York-artworld moment from the intervening years — one that art historian Anne Wagner has described as characterized by art’s preoccupation with its ability to continue to procure “witnesses,” to command a direct and immediate encounter, in the face of its participation in an increasingly technologically-mediated world.¹⁸¹

The concern, Wagner writes in “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” was pressing enough to bring the artist out from “behind” the artwork, the work’s “preoccupation with audience [taking] on signally aggressive, even manic, desperate, and coercive form.”¹⁸² Thus, for example, in Vito Acconci’s seminal 1971 video, *Centers*, the artist points his finger toward the video monitor while staring at the viewer for what can be an agonizingly long twenty-two minutes [fig. 61]. Standing before *Centers*, the viewer is summoned into being by Acconci’s relentless gesture, coercively produced *as a viewer* through the medium’s screen. Neshat’s gaze and pointing gun in *Faceless*, while arising out of different circumstances and changing the gendered terms of the work, nonetheless target the viewer in a way similar to Acconci in his video, emphasizing the photograph’s aggressive address. *Faceless*, however, raises the stakes, the figure’s “finger-pointing” not merely violating codes of proper, social behavior, but now allegedly life-threatening.¹⁸³

At the same time, in substituting a gun for Acconci’s finger, Neshat supplies her photographs with a good measure of feminist art-historical backing as well, linking *Women of Allah* to combative feminist and proto-feminist gestures using the artist’s own body as performing agent. Thus, we might recall Niki de Saint Phalle’s *Shooting* paintings of the early 1960s, in which the artist fired her gun at surfaces to which she had attached bags filled with paint — works following on the heels of Abstract

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Bayliss, “East Meets West Meets East,” *Artnews* (November 2006), 163. Jenni Sorkin echoes this argument, claiming that Neshat’s art “takes on an Arab-fearing West and manages to leave the West out completely” (26-7).

¹⁸¹ Anne M. Wagner, “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 59-80.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 68.

Expressionism and in response to its celebration of masculine virility [fig. 62]. Or Valie Export's 1968 performance and associated photographs in *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, in which the Austrian artist sits on a bench wearing crotchless trousers, legs spread-eagled, and holding in her arms a machine gun poised to be turned onto the viewer — the viewer towards whom she also directs her gaze [fig. 63]. Or, perhaps, Martha Rosler's 1975 video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in which the artist stands in a kitchen as though to give the viewer a television cooking lesson, brandishing not a gun but various kitchen utensils as she recites a gastronomic lexicon from A to Z. Rosler's lesson swiftly becomes aggressive, as she moves from apron, to bowl, to chopper, and so on. As the six-minute video progresses, Rosler stabs her fork, knife, and ladle, into the air at an imaginary victim, jerking her body in abrupt, forceful motions while demonstrating for the viewer how to "use" a nutcracker, a pan, or a rolling pin [fig. 64]. Emerging in the context of late 1960s and 70s social unrest, Export and Rosler's overtly defiant and confrontational actions forbid the viewer the pleasure and distance of the voyeuristic gaze, each artist in her own way armed and ready for revolt.

Pepe Karmel interpreted a related style of critical defiance in Neshat's work when he viewed *Women of Allah* in 1995 at Annina Nosei Gallery, describing "Ms. Neshat's imagery" as "tainted by a 1960's-style glorification of revolutionary violence: radical chic comes back, in her pictures, as radical sheik."¹⁸⁴ According to Karmel, Neshat's photographs evidenced her "nostalgia for fundamentalism," and her attraction "to the revolutionary fervor of Iranian society."¹⁸⁵ And yet, although Neshat's photographs freely borrow from a visual language of protest, there is nothing in her photographs to allow viewers definitively to determine the artist's attitude toward her ostensible subject. Indeed, in this respect too can Neshat's photographs be said to have a Euro-American art-historical pedigree. Like the work of Cindy Sherman and Andy Warhol, perhaps the most obvious examples of artists working in a deadpan vein, Neshat's art can be frustratingly blank in tone, resulting, paradoxically, in a wide range of contradictory approaches to her work. Thus, for each critic who like Karmel sees *Women of Allah* as naïvely or polemically celebratory of Islamic fundamentalism, there are at least two more who interpret it as critical, feminist resistance to such fundamentalism, as indeed to all forms of patriarchal authority.

That the same set of photographs is deployed to stand in for such opposing claims ought to signal, however, the instability of the critics' descriptions — their basis in the proclivities and beliefs of the authors, rather than in the photographs themselves. For *Women of Allah* resolutely prohibits viewers' ability to interpret and understand the figures represented. The straightforward and frontally-composed photographs mine the aesthetics of neutrality and objectivity of the documentary camera, while the figures' expressions are ultimately impenetrable to interpretation — directing our attention to the *fact* of the confrontation, without going so far as to stage its character or disposition. Though critics read the women of *Women of Allah* as either oppressed or resistant — locating in their faces either plaintive or combative expressions — these descriptors are

¹⁸⁴ Karmel, C27.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. Similarly, a brief review of Neshat in the "People" section of *Time* described her art as follows: "Veiled in chadors, modern Iranian women are hailed as warriors of revolution," (May 9, 1994, 51).

ultimately unsatisfactory, built around hasty assumptions instigated by the figures' black veils and guns. Here Neshat's own description of her stance in *Women of Allah* might be worth remembering: "From the beginning I made a decision that this work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject [of "women in the veil"], and that my position was going to be *no position*. I then put myself at a place of only asking questions but never answering them."¹⁸⁶

Concentrate on the figure's eyes in *Faceless, Rebellious Silence*, or "*Unveiling*" — or indeed in *Offered Eyes*, which abstracts all but a single eye. The expression is cool, detached, neither accusatory nor fatigued; in its "insistent blankness," it is like a Minimalist object.¹⁸⁷ The expression isn't quite expressionless, but it comes close. It is wooden, void of affect.¹⁸⁸ During such moments of close and sustained looking, the figure's gaze appears so impassive that the figure herself seems to border on the inanimate. She is stiff, bereft of interiority, as indeed her eyes cease to register as something "she" looks through. During these moments, the figure's "presence" is most undermined.

And yet, the impression cannot be sustained. Refocus your gaze and the woman's eyes again project qualities of psychic interiority and introspection, even as her expression never clearly resolves (and therefore the question of her status as either victim or warrior can never be ascertained, indeed cannot be considered the appropriate question). At the same time, although the woman's expression remains unclear, its illegibility does not mean that her look achieves nothing. Returning to the point made earlier, her look must be understood as directed outward and toward the viewer, in a way that, to appropriate the words of T. J. Clark in his description of Manet's *Olympia*, "obliges him to imagine a whole fabric of sociality in which this look might make sense and include him..."¹⁸⁹ So looking out at the viewer, coercively locking her gaze with his,

¹⁸⁶ Bertucci, 86.

¹⁸⁷ Potts, 194.

¹⁸⁸ Dadi is the only observer of the photographs I have found to note and emphasize this aspect, also relating it to contemporary art history: "A feature shared by practically all of [the photographs] is their lack of affect and depth. The faces of the characters betray few emotions, and the photographs are dramatic in flat and staged manner.... While they participate in many of the conventions of studio and portrait photography, as portraits they are not expressive, as the lighting and the printing of the photographs produce a deflated, collage-like aesthetic effect. In an analogous manner, Benjamin Buchloh, writing on the deployment of allegory in Martha Rosler's *Bowery* photographs notes a similar deadpan, affectless, and non-aesthetic strategy..." (Dadi, "The Calligraphic Veil: Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Allegories," in "Visual Modernities in a Comparative Perspective: the West, and South Asian and Asian-American Art" [Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2003], 185).

¹⁸⁹ Clark's passage describing *Olympia*'s "look" is worth quoting at greater length here, as much of the description resonates with the expression of figures in *Women of Allah*: "This is not a look which is generalized or abstract or evidently 'feminine.' It appears to be blatant and particular, but it is also unreadable, perhaps deliberately so. It is candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance — so precisely, so deliberately, that it comes to be read as a production of the depicted person herself... it is *her* look, her action upon us, her composition of herself. It is not just looking, that is the point... Aggression is not the word for it... Compliance is inaccurate.... *Olympia*, on the other hand, looks out at the viewer in a way which obliges him to imagine a

the figure demands the viewer acknowledge his or her own perceptual and embodied stance when confronting the woman in the *chador*.

III. Facing *Faceless* — Script and Image

Until now this chapter has somewhat disingenuously deferred dealing with the script that covers the surface of most of the *Women of Allah* photographs, even as the remainder of its pages contend that script plays a vital role in how the series functions. In part, the chapter's postponement of this analysis has been motivated by the problem script seems to have posed for the critics. Indeed, some reviewers avoid mentioning altogether the presence of writing upon the artworks, basing their claims exclusively on the photographs' provocative *visual* content, actively evidencing the primacy of the scopic sense in Western epistemologies. Certainly script poses a problem of legibility for the majority of Neshat's critics and viewers; however, like the figures' indecipherable gaze, script works upon the artworks in significant ways, producing meaning despite its illegibility. Together with the figures' gazes, script enables viewers illiterate in Persian to engage the photographs — and the women represented in them — in meaningful ways that ultimately speak to the possibility of ethical cross-cultural exchange. Refusing to generalize the role of script upon *Women of Allah*, after addressing some of the art-critical and scholarly treatments of the script, this chapter will conclude by closely analyzing how it functions visually and formally within one work in particular, *Faceless*. As the concluding passages of this chapter will argue, the conjunction of script and image in *Faceless* provokes highly charged questions about the figure's status — as tangible or perceptual thing, as “real” or metaphorical image, as “documentary” or dramatic work. Recalling the dysfunctional dialogues and mediated, visual confrontations between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic during the hostage crisis, *Faceless* stages a dynamic visual and embodied encounter between viewer and figure with significant historical and contemporary implications.

When art criticism has dealt with the script in *Women of Allah*, its approach has typically been to collapse it into its various understandings of the artworks as feminist critique. Art historically, the interpretation makes sense, and — as in the visual comparison between *Women of Allah* and feminist art practices of the 1960s and 1970s — can easily be reinforced by linking Neshat's strategy to other feminist work that brings together word and image. Thus, Barbara Kruger's appropriative art of the 1980s — in which the artist assembled together images, typically taken from American print-media sources, with words — seems an evident precursor to Neshat's own practice. Kruger's *Untitled (Perfect)*, 1980, collages the image of the torso of a woman, hands clasped together as though in prayer, with the word “perfect” written in bold, capital letters emblazoned across the lower edge of the image [fig. 65]. The work thus seems to critique the ideal of submissive femininity, with the image of a woman who has no (read: needs

whole fabric of sociality in which this look might make sense and include him...” (in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], 133).

no) head, but who embodies piety, virtue, deference and goodness. Juxtaposing *Perfect* with Neshat's own images of pious women — perhaps with *Stories of Martyrdom*, which also depicts hands in a (Muslim) prayer position [fig. 33] — in a social context where religion and feminism don't mix, it is easy to see why so many reviewers “read” the Persian script on *Women of Allah* as feminist attack against religious patriarchy.¹⁹⁰ Thus, for example, according to one art critic, script “obscure[s] the surfaces of many of the photographs, often further ‘veiling’ Neshat’s face, hands, or feet,” acting as a second oppressive veil imprisoning the woman, supplemental to the one she is already forced to wear.¹⁹¹

Ultimately, however, interpretations of the script in *Women of Allah* reiterate the same tensions apparent in the diverse understandings of the artworks' visual content. Opposing the notion of script as oppressive veil, script is alternately understood to act as “a symbol of women's desire to communicate” — as a voice surfacing on the bodies of Muslim women who are “publicly censored and held captive in their traditional roles.”¹⁹² In this case, script represents the women's power and agency, a liberatory voice resistant to an oppressive Islam — an interpretation to which some of Neshat's own statements lend support.¹⁹³ On the other hand, for *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, in a passage from a review quoted earlier in this chapter, the written word upon Neshat's photographs acts in defiance of Western stereotypes, functioning as “a quasi-revolutionary instrument” and allowing the artist “symbolically [to] plac[e] political power in the hands of the kinds of veiled women who are automatically assumed by many Westerners to be oppressed victims of Islamic religious law, but who don't necessarily see themselves that way at all.”¹⁹⁴ In Cotter's view, the Muslim women Neshat represents are powerful agents in support of Islam, rather than against it, or in spite of it, as most other critics suggest. Of course it is helpful to know, as indeed many of the critics tell us, that the writing upon the images quotes “the poetry of Iranian

¹⁹⁰ Other striking, visual comparisons between Kruger's work and Neshat's can be made as well. *Rebellious Silence* [fig. 2], for example, seems clearly to evoke *Your Body is a Battleground* (1989) — a work made in conjunction with NOW's 1989 March for Women's Lives demonstration, at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., aimed at influencing the Supreme Court's consideration of reversing *Roe v. Wade* [fig. 66]. Neshat's photograph, with its imagery of the militant woman — gun in hand, and text written across a face split in half vertically down the center like that of the woman in *Your Body is a Battleground* — illustrates a woman prepared to fight for her rights, perhaps in resistance to those forces that have transformed her into representative of Culture, Nation, Tradition, and so on. I also can't help but mention here in the context of Neshat's feminism, the similarity between *Offered Eyes* and the Women's Action Coalition's *WAC is Watching: Women Take Action* graphic, created around the same time (1992) and both using the image of the female eye with text to emphasize women as witness, and actor, in issues affecting women's lives [fig. 67].

¹⁹¹ Schwabsky, 88.

¹⁹² Attias, 174.

¹⁹³ Thus, in her interview with Sheybani, Neshat states, “[t]he poetry is the symbolic voice of women whose sexuality and individualism have been obliterated by the *chador* or the veil” (207).

¹⁹⁴ Cotter, A36.

feminists”¹⁹⁵ — a fact that is taken further to affirm the feminism of Neshat’s own gesture. Writing, in this latter approach, therefore represents an “act of resistance” and a “symbol of female opposition.”¹⁹⁶

Not all viewers, however, are privy to the knowledge of the poets’ feminist credentials, and exhibitions of *Women of Allah* rarely offer translations of the poems to accompany the artworks.¹⁹⁷ The illegibility of the poetry, paired with the lack of knowledge as to its sources, has led some to assume that the words on the photographs cite the Qu’ran.¹⁹⁸ The mistake is inevitable, writes one critic, “given the prevalence of stereotypes about Islamic fundamentalism, in which the Qur’an is the compulsory — the only possible — text.”¹⁹⁹ We might even say this is an assumption the artworks themselves cultivate, given Neshat’s militaristic imagery and the contemporary discursive climate, in which the Qu’ran is understood not only as the “only possible” text, but also as radical, political doctrine encouraging followers to violence and hatred.²⁰⁰ Nonetheless, (mis-)understanding the Qu’ran as the text cited upon the photographs leads to the same contradictory set of interpretations inspired by *Women of Allah*’s visual content, as well as sets in motion further assumptions. For perhaps the script quotes Qu’ranic passages pertaining to women and to the tyrannical injunction to veil, as some viewers are led to think?²⁰¹ Or do the women *choose* to wear the Qu’ran upon their skin, boldly emblazoning their aspirations for global *jihād*? Whether understood as war paint or oppressive text, the script enables and enhances the binary perception of Muslim women as either active (revolutionary) agents, or subjugated, passive victims.

At the same time, as these interpretations and assumptions about the words on the surfaces of the photographs show, script functions also to leave most viewers out of the

¹⁹⁵ Reid, 105. The following chapter will explore and complicate the designation of feminism in relation to Neshat and the Iranian poets quoted on the photographs, addressing the poems themselves in conjunction with Neshat’s images, the poets’ position in Iranian history, as well as some of Neshat’s own statements.

¹⁹⁶ Sorkin, 26-27.

¹⁹⁷ The show at Artspeak that inspired such passionate debate is one exception to this statement.

¹⁹⁸ Art critic Jonathan Goodman makes a similar mistake in his review of Neshat’s photographs, describing the writing on the photograph *Speechless* as quoting “a contemporary religious text” (53).

¹⁹⁹ Zabel, 22-25. See also Larson, 19.

²⁰⁰ On his HBO show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, well-known political commentator and comedian, Bill Maher, recently aired his view of Islam and the Qu’ran in a conversation with Minnesota congressman Keith Ellison, a practicing Muslim: “We are dealing with a culture that is in its medieval era. It comes from a hate-filled holy book — the Qu’ran — which is taken very literally by its people. They are trying to get nuclear weapons...” (episode 205, air date March 11, 2011). In 2010, Florida pastor Terry Jones gained notoriety after announcing his plan to burn 200 Qu’rans on the ninth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. Jones cancelled the event after media coverage of his plans inspired international outrage, protests across the Muslim world and in the West. In March 2011, Jones held a “trial of the Quran” in his church, the Christian Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, finding it “guilty” of “crimes against humanity.” Examples of such discourse abound in the media of the last several decades.

²⁰¹ Larson, 19.

know — thus also acting as a protective barrier for the woman.²⁰² “Though promising legibility,” writes one art critic, “these signs are unintelligible to most Westerners,” as the words’ presence “draw[s] our attention to the areas they cover while continuing to screen them from us.”²⁰³ Similarly, art historian Jenni Sorkin writes that, “[a]s westerners, we are left out of the text as we are left out of the discussion, having no valuable opinion on what we could never really understand anyway...”²⁰⁴ Paired with Neshat’s appropriative imagery, the script refuses penetration into the women’s private territory — a feminist, postcolonial rejoinder to the Western invasion into Muslim women’s space.²⁰⁵

A final outcome of the script’s untranslated status, and the counterpart to its refusal of certain viewers’ “penetration,” is that some viewers *can* read the poems and engage their meaning, thus producing the notion of an “original” text privileging native readers of Persian. Cichocki, Akbarnia, and Dabashi — scholars and art historians addressed earlier in this chapter — all variously argue that the poetry contains the “key” to unlocking the images. Thus, in Cichocki’s words, “[t]he complexity of Neshat’s work only emerges when taking a closer look at those aspects of her work lost on her primarily Western audience.”²⁰⁶ Similarly, Akbarnia claims that *Women of Allah*’s largest audience, consisting of non-readers, is only “able to understand the works at their most *basic* level, or first layer of reference,” while the series’ smallest and most selective audience has access to the works’ “most *complex* level of meaning.”²⁰⁷ Although in providing translations of the poetry these authors attempt to offer Neshat’s “average” viewer more expansive understandings of her work, basing their analyses on the conjunction of text and image in *Women of Allah*, the suggestion that Iranian reader-viewers have more complex, and therefore more complete, access to the work is fundamentally flawed. As one critic claims, the poetry quoted on the photographs, while “reportedly seen as radical within Iranian culture... is, unfortunately, less powerful translated into English.”²⁰⁸ Translation in itself cannot bridge the divide between *Women of Allah*’s varied viewers.

²⁰² Mona Hatoum’s 1998 video *Measures of Distance* seems an important precursor to Neshat’s work in this respect. Although Hatoum translates the Arabic text of her correspondence with her mother, reciting in English the translated contents of their letters sent to one another from London and Beirut, the written Arabic words travel across the television screen and over translucent photographs of her mother’s body, screening her from the viewer’s gaze and — along with the screen of the monitor itself — emphasizing her distance, her position out of the viewer’s (and Hatoum’s) reach.

²⁰³ Schwabsky, 88.

²⁰⁴ Sorkin, 26-27.

²⁰⁵ Dadi makes this claim in his Ph.D. dissertation as well, writing that, “[t]he inscriptions are of course, of immense significance to the reading of the photographs... However, of far greater significance is the fact that the texts... are completely unreadable for the immediate primary audience of the photographs, the Western art world.” Complicating this claim, however, Dadi also adds that the writing might re-Orientalize Neshat’s images: “The calligraphy partly works as ornament, but also writes something that is unrecoverable in its immediacy, reiterating the cliché of Oriental inscrutability” (“The Calligraphic Veil: Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Allegories,” 188).

²⁰⁶ Cichocki, n.p.

²⁰⁷ Akbarnia, 8, my italics.

²⁰⁸ Schwenderer, 33-34.

Neshat herself points out, “Iranians not only could read and understand the meaning of the poetry but are also very familiar with the history and place of the writers in relation to Iranian society — something that would be impossible to translate to Westerners.”²⁰⁹ Moreover, as the next chapter contends, *Women of Allah*’s citation of poetry invokes embodied practices of poetic recitation and invocation — aspects of the citations that cannot be conveyed in translation.

Nonetheless, despite their ability to read and understand the poems written upon *Women of Allah*, native readers do not have *privileged* access to this body of artwork — they simply have *different* access to it. Here Bakhtin’s premise, that words exist simultaneously in various dialogical spaces, bears remembering. For while the links and interrelationships between an utterance, its object, and the “thousands of living dialogic threads” coexisting in its social environment and historical moment form one component of the utterance’s dialogism, the other involves the utterance’s participation in conversation.²¹⁰ Thus, “every word,” Bakhtin writes, “is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates”²¹¹:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it *and structures itself in the answer’s direction*. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue.²¹²

What Bakhtin’s insight can help us to understand in the case of *Women of Allah*, is that the photographs structure themselves toward the different viewers who approach them in different ways. If the words on the surface of *Women of Allah* stand out to Iranian reader-viewers, begging to be read and the poems thus to be recalled, Western viewers and non-readers engage the artworks with their own habits, behaviors and resources, seeing and interpreting the photographs in ways potentially abstracted and unavailable to readers of Persian. While the presence of Persian script upon *Women of Allah*’s appropriative imagery divisively interpellates these varied viewers as either Iranian or American, script can also prompt us to understand *difference* outside of its normatively hierarchical implications — cast, in the case of “Orient” and “Occident” (or Islam and the West, Iran and America), in terms of the relative inferiority and superiority of the two cultures.²¹³

²⁰⁹ MacDonald, 327.

²¹⁰ Bakhtin, 276. Please refer to this dissertation’s introduction for a wider discussion of Bakhtin’s theories of appropriation and dialogism.

²¹¹ Ibid., 280, italics in the original.

²¹² Ibid., my italics.

²¹³ Neshat herself acknowledges that viewers will approach her work with different abilities and aptitudes, and describes an investment in such a non-hierarchical notion of “difference”: “I think my work translates *differently* to Muslims than to Westerners. To Muslims, I hope it speaks about the need for communication and clarification about events that are taking place in Muslim territories and the impression the world is capturing about us. In places like Iran, almost two decades after the Islamic revolution, people are now beginning to look back, and analyze why and how their country has undergone such immense transformation. My work is just an example of that type of inquiry. In the West, I think my work confronts Westerners with their perceptions or misperceptions about Muslims. In a way, my images are at first none other than what we are

While the above considerations of the script written on the *Women of Allah* photographs touch upon various implications of the presence of writing upon the works, none of the arguments assess how script functions in any particular artwork within the series. The final passages of this chapter are motivated by an attention to the script's formal appearance on the artworks, and to the effect of the dynamic interplay between script and image on the viewing bodies engaging the work.

To begin, not enough has been made of the fact that in *Women of Allah*, the script, while visually overlaying the bodies of the women, was in fact written on top of the photographic surfaces. That is, the words appear on the material surface of the photographs, rather than directly upon the bodies depicted — a distinction that is emphatically clear when viewing the artworks in person, as the ink can be seen visibly to rise from the photographic surface.²¹⁴ That the writing appears upon the photographs, rather than upon the body itself, significantly affects how viewers see the script and engage with the artworks, and is a key feature distinguishing *Women of Allah* from related artworks in which the script exists within the narrative space of the representation.

Compare, for example, Neshat's "*Unveiling*" or *Speechless* to the work of contemporary New York-based, Moroccan artist, Lalla Essaydi. Although #22*B* (2005) and #17 (2005), from Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc* series (2005-2008), clearly borrow from Neshat's compendium of artistic strategies, combining script with representations of veiled women who look directly out to the viewer, one of the defining differences between the two artists' approaches is in their respective treatments of script

accustomed to see in journals daily, but then I hope it goes deeper and touches on some of the complexities of the subject. I try to identify those 'different' values that may appear bizarre to Western viewers but are relevant to Muslims according to their unique religious, social and political history. Ultimately, I am not interested in defending or glorifying Islam but to insert possible contradictions, other realities in between the myth that exists around it... The question of translation has been a difficult one for me. As much as I desire all my viewers to completely understand what the text says, and as much as I translate the Farsi text into English for each exhibition, I find that a lot gets lost because of the problem of 'differences' in languages, and I don't think I can resolve that! At the end, I believe the image with its many components will affect each one of us differently according to our personal relationship to the subject. And, I am very comfortable with that" (Patrizia Mania, "Dietro il Chador: Shirin Neshat, artista iraniana-americana," *Opening*, Spring 1997, n.p.).

²¹⁴ In an early review of the photographs, Amei Wallach mistakenly identifies the script as written directly upon the women's faces ("Rejecting the melting pot. My canvas, my self: Shirin Neshat," *New York Newsday*, February 23, 1994, 50-51). As the title of her article suggests, Wallach's erroneous reading allows the artworks to be understood as investigations of the artist's identity. Relatedly, in 2000, Zhang Huan, contemporary Chinese artist based in Shanghai and New York, produced a series of nine photographs showcasing the artist's face at various intervals after calligraphers wrote upon it in heavy black ink quoting Chinese folklore. Entitled *Family Tree*, the series reveals Huan's face as increasingly covered by the ink that blends into his skin, until the final picture where he is nearly entirely obliterated by it, suggesting both the strength and the weight of his ties to family, genealogy and his Chinese roots. Although *Women of Allah* may be interpreted in similar terms, the fact that the script does *not* blend into the figure's skin and instead visibly appears on the photographic surface complicates that interpretation.

[figs. 22, 43, 68 and 69]. Whereas writing in *Women of Allah* overlays only select areas of the compositions, in Essaydi's case, the artist meticulously covers *all* surfaces with script — from the cloth-covered background walls and floor, to the women's skin and clothing — penned directly onto these surfaces before photographing her scenes. As a result, in none of Essaydi's photographs is the status of the script's position *within* the representational space in question. Notice, for example, how the script on the background wall in #17, or in the bottom foreground of #22B, blurs where that part of the image is out of focus. In #17, moreover, the script written onto the woman's skin visibly negotiates the oily surface of her flesh — it is more viscous, heightening the impression of her body's physicality and density, its texture and substance. Even in #17, where portions of the figure's veil occasionally appear to converge with the similarly patterned background wall, the body's occupation of space is never thrown into doubt, as the folds of her veil always emphasize her three-dimensional presence.

By contrast, in “*Unveiling*” and *Speechless*, as in the other *Women of Allah* photographs, the script's status on top of the photographic surface results in its staying in focus across the image. The words and letters are always proximate to the viewer, and, as a result, their status is never hazy, their outlines always visible. Although readers of Arabic can surely read *some* of the writing in any given photograph by Essaydi, the sheer extent of the writing makes reading the script in its entirety impractical, if not impossible, given both its distance from the viewer, and the fact that Essaydi often writes layers upon layers of text; writing's function in Essaydi's work is as a result as ornamental to reader-viewers as it is for non-reader-viewers. By contrast, reading the writing on Neshat's photographs is always manageable, for those who can. Moreover, although Neshat conforms the script to the contours and edges of the body it overlays — as in *Faceless* where the writing curves to accommodate the bend in the figure's knuckles — it does so according to their edges on the two-dimensional pictorial surface rather than to their actual, physical contours. Thus, the ink remains uniform across the surface of human flesh, its consistent flatness over the image drawing attention away from the image's (combative) representational space and to the medium's physical surface. In “*Unveiling*,” the one exception to the script's otherwise consistently superficial status in *Women of Allah*, the oily letters written directly upon Neshat's chest only emphasize further the precision and materiality of the script written upon the photograph across her face.

How all of this plays out in the act of looking is exquisitely complicated, as script produces important perceptual effects with significant metaphorical as well as physical and embodied implications. On the one hand, in directing attention away from the representational space within the image and to the photograph's material surface, script emphasizes the photograph's facture, disrupting the documentary and realist look mined by the photographs' black-and-white aesthetic and their straightforward, frontal compositions. On the other hand, as the concluding paragraphs of this chapter aim to demonstrate, script also activates and animates the image, ultimately refusing the photograph's attempt to fix and contain the figure as static thing.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Script, in effect, allows Neshat to maintain her photographs' sculptural qualities — even as she largely abandoned sculpture and installation following her show at Franklin Furnace —

Take *I am its Secret*, or *Speechless*, or *Faceless*. Although viewers might occasionally interpret the script as though it exists within the economy of the image and its representational space, truly engaging the intricacy and patterning of the script registers its status on top of the image and its material surface. As a result, in these moments of sustained concentration on script and surface, the picture's representational space flattens out and the woman in the image recedes from view, throwing any sense of her material, bodily presence into doubt. While the woman might still be there, *somewhere* in the periphery of the viewer's field of vision, the presence of the script overpowers and impinges upon that of the woman — abstracting her, eclipsing her, transforming her from a sentient presence into a ghostly trace and spectral image.

As viewer surveys script, the woman becomes less substantial, her position in space tenuous and vague. At some point in the act of looking, the viewer must recognize that the woman's presence is contingent upon him or her. As a result of his or her act of perception, the viewer renders the woman's space flat and uninhabitable, abstracting her, effacing her, effectively extinguishing her presence from the picture. That the viewer's erasure of the woman can occur inadvertently, as an unanticipated byproduct of the act of looking, makes the gesture all the more disconcerting. For in simply looking amiss, the viewer becomes complicit in killing the woman.

At the same time, although in looking the viewer risks obliterating the woman, in *Faceless*, among other photographs in the series, *she* is the one with the gun [fig. 31]. And what's more, she never remains effaced for very long, perversely always returning to view. For without fail, at some point in engaging the photograph's script, the figure's body and the image's representational space snap back into focus (and it is then the script's turn to disappear, dispersing and diffusing into the image). Ultimately, represented figure and superficial script alternate positions, depending on the viewer's attention, on his or her alternating absorption in the materiality of script and in the represented space. Viewer and figure therefore participate in a *reciprocal* act of looking; one, however, in which the balance of power seems to tip in favor of the woman, armed not only with her direct and steady gaze, but also with her gun.

Thus, engaging *Faceless*, the viewer participates in a staring contest — or in a “game of optical chicken,” to use Wagner's words, describing Acconci's interface with spectators of his 1969 *Performance Test*.²¹⁶ In *Faceless*, viewer and figure are the two active and present players, but each also represents a broader type — and the game thus a bigger struggle — for just as her image has been read (indeed, just as *this* image taunts the viewer to read her) as representative of “the” militant Muslim/Iranian woman, embodiment of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism, *she* also constructs the viewer as “the” American male, embodiment of a world superpower bent on asserting its might at all costs.

As a result, the encounter with *Faceless* escalates into a chilling contest of international brinkmanship, the actors using the kinds of threat and intimidation tactics that Iran and the U.S. have been engaging since the start of the Islamic Republic and the

maintaining in her photographs the sense of the figure's dynamic qualities, their elusiveness and contingency.

²¹⁶ Wagner, 73.

moment of the hostage ordeal.²¹⁷ According to John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State in the Eisenhower administration who coined the term during the Cold War, the “art” of brinkmanship was in the “ability to get to the verge without getting into the war... If you try to run away from [war], if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost.”²¹⁸ Continuing on to describe America’s application of the strategy toward the threat of Communism, Dulles claimed, “We walked to the brink and we looked it *in the face*. We took strong action.”²¹⁹ Walking to the brink, however, is dangerous business, for the risk of utter catastrophe — the risk of mutual and total devastation — is always there. The “art” depends on that too.

Faceless thus suggests that the hostility that emerged during the hostage ordeal persists in the present and with the same degree of urgency — and that the suspicion and enmity with which Iran and the U.S. viewed one another then, might always persist. For, like Acconci, the figure in Neshat’s photograph is relentlessly insistent, her gun always prepared to shoot at its target. Although for a time, each combatant in *Faceless* may hold his or her ground in a rigid standoff, ultimately, the viewer must realize he’s the one in a lose-lose situation: for in effacing the woman, whether inadvertently or not, he opens the gates to all-out war; in walking away, he relents and is “lost.”

And yet, this description of the confrontation with *Faceless* has perhaps been blind to the range of the viewer’s options — failing, in the hasty leap to conflict, to consider the possibility of conciliation. After all, in refusing the viewer’s hasty apprehension of the figure, script’s conjunction with image forces him to engage — face-to-face — and to understand the act of looking as everything but neutral. Indeed, if we could, for just a moment, rid ourselves of our collective siege mentality, we might also begin to see things differently, and to recall how constitutive our own acts of perception have been in constructing our understanding of the woman — alternately bringing her into being and “effacing” her, producing her as “real” and particular embodied presence, and as symbol of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, taking a step back, we might see that in her eyes, we read those of Khomeini, and we might also read her gun again as metaphorical prop rather than as genuine threat.

²¹⁷ See, for example, Alex Brummer, “Reagan threat to strike at Iran’s missiles: US to seek backing at Venice summit for Gulf escort mission”: “The US, in a pre-summit display of brinkmanship, is letting it be known that it is considering a pre-emptive strike if the Iranians go ahead with full deployment of Silkworm surface-to-ship missiles at the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf.... The US is cautious about going public on its military options for destroying the Silkworm missiles, for fear of provoking militants in Iran who may be determined to deploy and even use the missiles. By handling the matter carefully, it hopes that the moderates will quietly back down on making the missiles operational. Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, said his country must prepare to fight the US in the Gulf and told Arab states that it would attack any bases and ports the Americans are allowed to use” (in *The Guardian*, June 6, 1987).

²¹⁸ Quoted in Eugene R. Wittkopf, Christopher Martin Jones, Charles W. Kegley, *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 92; originally from John Foster Dulles, “A Policy of Liberation,” *Life*, May 19, 1952, 19.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, my italics.

Finally, returning to *Faceless* to look again, we might understand the figure's disappearance not as the viewer's erasure of her presence. The woman's disappearance might indicate something else entirely, as, in disappearing, *she* causes *our* point of view to shift. In disappearing, the woman indicates that she exceeds our perception of her — she is vital and dynamic, rather than fixed and static, her complexities way outside of our reach. She has a life, a history, and, if we'll let her, a future, beyond that which we have ever seen or described, or could ever anticipate or know. Ultimately, in disappearing, the woman shows us that, having gone to the brink and looked it in the face, she is prepared simply to walk away, inviting us — now with the background of history and with a renewed perception — to take the leap and do the same.

CHAPTER THREE:
WOMEN OF ALLAH: “ONCE MORE, THE DARKNESS WILL LEAVE THIS HOUSE”

And since the storehouse of memory is kept and watched over by the poets, whose business it is to find and make the words we live by, it may be wise to turn in conclusion to two of them... in order to find an approximate articulation of the actual content of our lost treasure.

Hannah Arendt

*My country, I will build you again,
If need be, with bricks made from my life,
I will build columns to support your roof,
If need be, with my bones.
I will inhale again the perfume of flowers,
Flavored by your youth,
I will wash again the blood of your body,
With torrents of my tears.
Once more, the darkness will leave this house.
I will paint my poems blue,
with the color of our sky.
Old I may be, but given the chance,
I will learn.
I will begin a second youth,
Alongside my progeny.
I will recite the hadith of love of country,
With such fervor as to make each word bear life.
There still burns a fire in my breast,
To keep undiminished the warmth of kinship I feel for my people.
Once more, you will grant me strength,
Though my poems have settled in blood.
Once more, I will build you,
With my life,
Though it be beyond my means.*

“My country, I will build you again,” as read by Neshat
on the Charlie Rose Show, June 9, 2006.

At the end of her 2006 appearance on the Charlie Rose Show, Shirin Neshat closed the interview by reading aloud a lyric poem — “My country, I will build you again” [*Do bareh Misazamat Vatan*], by contemporary Iranian poet, Simin Behbahani (b. 1927). The interview, guest-conducted by prominent curator of 20th-century art David A. Ross, had centered on issues of Neshat’s exile, her personal recollections of the revolutionary momentum in Iran in the early 1970s, and the politics of her art practice, but in concluding with the poem, Neshat invoked, and asked viewers of the show to contemplate, another artist’s words and experiences.

In her lilting voice, Neshat reads Behbahani's poem, in English translation. The slight movements of her head (following the poem's cadences, and in affirmation of its words), the rhythm and pace of her recitation (the pauses at certain moments, the quickened delivery at others), and the subtle intensity of Neshat's voice during her reading, all inflect the poem's meaning, giving form to the words' gravity or levity, their sense of despair or hope. In reciting Behbahani's poem, Neshat at once lends her voice to the poetic persona and *its* love of country, and she assumes that voice as her own, articulating her own sentiments by way of the poem. Throughout her delivery, it is clear that Neshat does not merely read the poem; rather, she *feels* its meaning, and by the end of her recitation, the artist is visibly moved.

Given the substance of Neshat's interview, "My Country, I will build you again" addresses contemporary Iran under the rulership of the Islamic Republic, from the artist's perspective in exile. The desire expressed by Neshat to rebuild her country is, that is, directed at today's Iran, decades into the theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic. Behbahani's poem, however, addresses the country at a rather different point in its history and under a different set of circumstances. Published in Iran in 1981, Behbahani's renowned poem is to this day "considered one of the most enduring Iran-Iraq war poems" — the country *it* wished to rebuild having just entered into that ruinous war.²²⁰

Thus, in Neshat's vocalizing Behbahani's poem in the context of her interview, the "I" of the poem at once remains distinct and becomes shared, as the visual artist channels the poet's voice. For viewers who recognize Behbahani's lines (*their* history, *their* points of reference), the work maintains its power and resonance as a response to the battle between Iran and Iraq, even as the "blood" of the nation's body is now long congealed; at the same time, such viewers also accept that Neshat speaks through the poem's words, adopting the words to describe her own predicament, her own "fire" and "fervor." One might say that Neshat "appropriates" the poem, filling its words with her "own accent... adapting [them] to [her] own semantic and expressive intention," but only if her appropriation is understood always also to preserve the "tastes of the context and contexts in which [the poem] has lived its socially charged life" and out of which it emerged.²²¹ Neshat's words are in dialogue with Behbahani's, entangled with them, maintaining their historical resonance in the context of her reading while also revising them according to her own present terms.

In reciting Behbahani's poem, Neshat invites viewers to interpret her act — to make sense of the connections she draws between herself and Behbahani, the past and the

²²⁰ Kamran Talattof, "'I Will Rebuild You, Oh My Homeland': Simin Behbahani's Work and Sociopolitical Discourse" in *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 27. Talattof claims that although Behbahani's poem "did not contribute to any particular ongoing [political] movement, it was rooted in the weakened leftist-nationalist discourse of its time..." — weakened, that is, because of Khomeini's Islamist movement's marginalization of other, anti-imperialist nationalist discourses opposing Mohammad Reza Shah's oppressive and dictatorial regime... (23).

²²¹ Bakhtin, 294 and 293, respectively. See the introduction to this dissertation for an elaboration on the relevance of Bakhtin's theories of appropriation and dialogue to Neshat's photographs. See also Talattof's essay for an enumeration of some of the various contemporary appropriations and re-interpretations of Behbahani's poem, among which Neshat's reading on the Charlie Rose Show can be included.

present, contemporary Iran and the country as it was thirty years ago.²²² Watching Neshat's moving reading, viewers familiar with the poem and attuned to the aesthetics of Neshat's delivery, might even move their bodies in turn, accompanying, and responding to, the artist's reconfiguration of the poem's meaning.²²³

Such responses, however, are given little occasion in the space of Neshat's interview. Whereas Neshat modulates her voice and body along with the poem's rhythms, Ross sits motionless during Neshat's delivery, and the interview ends abruptly following the artist's reading of the poem, the show's graphics quickly overtaking the screen. The viewer, like Neshat, is left alone to ponder the meanings engendered.

One.

While the previous chapter examined *Women of Allah* by investigating the photographs as instances of visual appropriation, arguing that, for viewers interpellated by the works as "American," the series invokes particular visual frames of reference and forms of knowledge, the present chapter examines the series by taking into account the poetic citations inscribed upon the photographs' surfaces. Through their citations of Iranian poetry, *Women of Allah* interpellates "Iranian" viewers, eliciting at once the meaning of the poems as well as a range of other capacities, histories, senses and knowledges — ones that might best be described as dialogical, oral/aural, and embodied.²²⁴ For although to the majority of *Women of Allah*'s viewers, the words upon

²²² Indeed, Talattof writes that Behbahani's poem "contains qualities that can be reinterpreted and re-read in different times to support different literary [and political] discourses" (23).

²²³ See below for a discussion of the role of bodily and facial gestures expressed by both speakers and listeners of poetic invocations.

²²⁴ Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, whose recent book, *The Ethical Soundscape*, explores the role of the popular Islamic cassette sermon in shaping the modern Egyptian political landscape, succinctly characterizes the different valuation of the senses in the Western and Muslim worlds in the modern era: "While historians have become increasingly cautious about accounts of modernity that posit a fundamental shift from the dominance of the ear to that of the eye, it is widely recognized that the politics, ethics, and epistemologies that defined the Enlightenment project were deeply entwined with a set of assumptions regarding the relative value of the senses. As a vast scholarship has documented, primary among these assumptions was a judgment concerning the superiority of vision over hearing. In contrast to the distance maintained between the eye and its objects of perception, listening was seen by its Enlightenment critics to involve the self's immersion within a sound from without, an engulfment that threatens the independence and integrity that grounds the masculine spectatorial consciousness..." (Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], 13). Given vision's pride of place as the privileged perceptual mode within Western modernity, early anthropologists, Hirschkind writes, regarded as inferior the "Islamic pedagogical techniques of listening, recitation, and memorization and the devotional repertoires of patterned gesture all [of which] displayed a sensuality and a mechanical, automatic character incongruous with practices of [rational] erudition..." (14). Skeptical of these sensory hierarchies, Hirschkind's book is premised on the belief that we today might benefit from a renewed understanding of the practices of the cassette sermon listeners who form the focus of his study, and which involve not only the oral/aural sensory register but also the "affective,

the photographs function as evocative visual pattern, to readers of Persian, these words are also carriers of significant meaning and, as quotations of poetry, they summon particular gestures, habits, styles of speech and forms of sociability. Whereas non-readers of Persian tend persistently to be drawn away from the presence of the text and into the visual drama of the images (as I aimed to show in the previous chapter), to viewers literate in Persian, the words are not so easily abstracted or overlooked. As intelligible, decipherable signs, these words orient themselves to the reader-viewer, adamantly reaching out of the picture and demanding to be read.

In the context of *Women of Allah*, in which the poetic quotations appear to be written upon the bodies of women who nearly always look directly out of the pictures and face their viewers, the women speak to and address viewers through the poetic citations, thus engaging a cultural tradition that privileges both poetry as well as artfulness and rhetorical agility in social interactions. According to William O. Beeman, linguistic anthropologist and scholar of discursive exchanges both within Iran, and between Iran and the U.S., the social dynamic of Iranian communication and interpersonal behavior “has an unmistakable aesthetic dimension”:

[S]kill in interaction is greatly appreciated in assessing an individual’s worth in society... It is not unreasonable to compare interpersonal relations in Iran to art, for negotiating the webs of everyday personal relations and interaction situations requires consummate skill for even those born into the system. Consequently, there are rewards for the adept and setbacks for the clumsy. Because a great deal rides on an individual’s adeptness at communication, verbal skills and the use of language take on great importance in every person’s life. Not surprisingly, too, words are rarely uttered or received idly. A person’s verbal performance becomes pregnant with import as the listener, practicing the skills he or she possesses as a communicator, tries to register every nuance of the verbal performance and interpret it successfully.²²⁵

Indeed, the memorization, invocation/recitation, and interpretation of poetry constitute some of the means through which speakers and listeners interact, and through which such discursive agility may be demonstrated. In their “recitations” of poetry, then, the women in *Women of Allah* address viewers as skilled speakers, summoning viewers’ own cultivated habits and skills, engaging them in an artful dialogue framed by poetry. As a result, this chapter maintains, meaning in *Women of Allah*, rather than inhering in the

kinesthetic, and gestural,” as these subjects aim to become ethical agents within the public and political spheres (28). Although Hirschkind’s claims are specific to the pious Egyptian listeners of the cassette sermon, the listeners’ gestures and modes of responsiveness to the sermons are, I believe, somewhat analogous to those of the listeners of poetic invocations and recitations that I describe in this chapter, and they draw from the same traditions. In the absence of focused scholarship on the gestural attitudes of Iranian speakers and listeners of poetry, I refer readers to Hirschkind’s fascinating study.

²²⁵ William O. Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1-2. See also the orientalist survey by Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951): “The Persians share in common with the Arabs a love for the spoken word. Repartee and witty conversation are highly regarded and much cultivated...” (212-13).

works themselves, emerges instead as a “creative negotiated social process” — one in which speaker and listener, or artwork and viewer, participate together.²²⁶

In the words of Hamid Naficy, scholar of Iranian Studies and of diasporic Iranian cinema and media, Iranian culture is “*suffused* by poetry and shaped by the citation of canonical, classical (and at times contemporary) poets in daily life; rich and poor can and do cite Ferdowsi, Sa’adi, Hafez, Rumi, and Khayyam.”²²⁷ Spanning age and socio-economic divisions, invocations of poetry are embedded in the fabric of Iranian social life, arising as often for enjoyment, as for scolding or imparting wisdom and advice.²²⁸ Echoing Naficy’s claim, Peter Chelkowski, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies scholar at New York University, who has also written widely on Iran, expounds:

It is no exaggeration to say that there is a poet in every Iranian and that almost every Iranian is familiar with the great poetic tradition of his country to a degree that is rare among people of other cultures. In the long history of the Iranian nation, the language and its literary idiom have played a pivotal role around which the nation and the culture have revolved. Age-old values do find expression in poetry even in today’s context. Poetry has been a reference system, a mirror of Iran’s history and heroic myth, an expression of national identity.²²⁹

Poetry thus serves both as a significant means through which Iranians relate to themselves and one another, as well as through which they experience and understand their history and present, shaping their worldview.²³⁰

Moreover, artful and agile recitations and interpretations of poetry involve oral/aural and embodied practices, as the reciter intones and inflects her voice in a manner noticeably different from that of everyday speech. Indeed, whether reciting for an audience or for oneself, poetry is typically read aloud in order to render audible and to

²²⁶ Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, ix.

²²⁷ Hamid Naficy, “The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile,” *Diaspora 1*, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 286, my italics. See also Thomas and Frye, op. cit., in which the authors describe poetry as “part of the life of the [Iranian] people,” and comment that it is not uncommon to hear “the poetry of one of the great classical poets of Iran being recited in a teahouse by anyone present.” Indeed, the authors continue, so prevalent is the knowledge and appreciation of poetry, that it “is not the exclusive preoccupation of professors or aesthetes... it is not surprising to hear an itinerant shepherd or merchant quote a line from Saadi to emphasize his point” (212-213).

²²⁸ See also page 57 of Maryam Y. Yekta Steininger’s book, *The United States and Iran: Different Values and Attitudes toward Nature Scratches on Our Hearts and Minds* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010), based on her 1984 doctoral dissertation at Columbia University.

²²⁹ Peter Chelkowski, “The Literary Genres in Modern Iran,” in *Iran under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 334. Indeed, Chelkowski continues on to claim that it is because of the Iranian poetic tradition that, “despite the total commitment of Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah to bring Iran into the community of the world’s advanced modern nations, the Arabic script of the Persian language has not been replaced by the Latin one as has been the case with Turkish” (334).

²³⁰ For her own part, Neshat maintains that “poetry... was central to her Iranian childhood (she remembers recitations, like parables passed on from parent to child)” (Goldberg, 66-67).

appreciate the musicality of the verses.²³¹ In reciting poetry, the speaker engages in subtle bodily movements — nodding the head, raising the eyebrows, slightly gesturing with the shoulders and arms — while attending to the rhythm and meaning of the words and phrases. Meanwhile, accompanying the speaker, listeners of poetic recitations might respond with their own movements — closing their eyes perhaps, while slightly moving their heads side to side — participating with the speaker in the delivery and import of the poem.

Such popular games and practices as *mushaereh* and bibliomancy [*fal-giri*], attest to the vital and dynamic place of poetry in contemporary Iranian social life. *Mushaereh* — which invokes players' ability quickly to recall and recite verses of poetry — underscores the role of poetic recitation as a social and dialogical interpretive enterprise, as well as the social value of the possession of a vast poetic repertoire.²³² In the customary practice of bibliomancy, a text — most popularly the *Divan* of the lyric poet, Hafez (d. 1390) — is consulted in order to gain “insight into the world of the unseen (*al-ghayb*), guide seekers in their actions and intents, assure them of their successes, and forewarn them of calamities.”²³³ According to this practice, one turns to the book of Hafez when faced with a particular challenge or question. Holding her question in mind, the questioner opens the book to a page at random, and the first lines upon which her eyes fall provide the response to her dilemma.²³⁴ In such an activity, the questioner looks to Hafez for wisdom and advice, accepting the poet's century-old words into her present context. Thus, while summoning Hafez' poetry, the questioner also interprets, reworks and revises its meanings in accordance with her own circumstances.

In recalling and reciting poetry, Iranians look to the wisdom of the poets and the past in order both to give meaning to their own present circumstances and to seek guidance for the future. Invoking a poem, a speaker draws a vital connection between

²³¹ As many anthropologists have noted, Irano-Islamic pedagogical traditions and cultural activities emphasize memorization by way of oral repetition and bodily movements. Thus the “city parks [fill] at exam time by students wandering up and down, reciting passages of text over and over” (Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, “An Ongian Look at Iran: Television, Rhetoric, and the Return of the Unconscious in Secondary Oral Culture,” in *Media, Consciousness and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, eds. Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, Paul A. Soukup [Newberry Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991], 142).

²³² Steininger describes *mushaereh* as follows: “In this game, one player will recite a section of a Persian poem, stopping at the end of a certain stanza. The next player will note the final letter of the last word of the previous player's stanza, and begin reciting a section of another poem, starting with that final letter. In this way, each player is able to demonstrate his or her knowledge of Persian poetry” (Steininger, 57.) At the end of the game, the player who recalls and correctly produces the most verses, wins. However, in the course of playing *mushaereh*, participants might occasionally also interrupt their recitations in order to discuss and expound upon the verses cited — their sources, meanings, the relationships produced between the distinct verses, and so on.

²³³ *Fal-nama: The Book of Omens* (ed. Massumeh Farhad and Serpil Bagci, London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 20. See this book, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Falnama: The Book of Omens* (October 24, 2009 – January 24, 2000), pages 19-41, for a wider elaboration of bibliomancy, which historically in Iran has included consultation with the Qu'ran and other religious Shi'a texts.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

past and present, while also reformulating the poem in new contexts, demonstrating her agility in poetic recollection and interpretation. So too, the speaker also engages her listeners, eliciting their own embodied habits and interpretive skills, while the nuances of their shared performance together give meaning to the poetic utterance.

According to some Iranian literary journals, since the Islamic Revolution, poetry as a genre has been in “crisis.”²³⁵ This event and its aftermath were so transformative, so violent and divisive, that, in this view, poetry could no longer speak to contemporary realities or the needs of the times, reflecting the loss of a shared symbolic system.²³⁶ Since the Revolution, secular and religious Muslim Iranians face one another with “suspicion and hostility,” even as many Muslims in Iran would distance themselves from the actions of the clerical government.²³⁷ It is, I believe, within this context that *Women of Allah* aims to speak, as the photographs seek to encompass and understand a worldview that — for many of their imagined viewers — remains hostile and inexplicable.

Women of Allah “speaks,” moreover, precisely through a recuperation of poetry and, in particular, of women’s poetry. Although Iran’s literary tradition is dominated by men, of all the literary genres, poetry was historically the most available to women in Iranian culture. In her analysis of Iranian women’s poetry and fiction, scholar of Iranian literature Farzaneh Milani claims that poetry “proved to fit most closely women’s circumstances and possibilities. Not only is poetry thoroughly integrated in Persian daily life, it can also be produced and transmitted in the privacy of the home without venturing into the social, economic, and political public world barred to women... By no small coincidence has poetry been for so long the main vehicle for women’s literary creativity — in fact, until recently, their only acknowledged contribution to Persian literature”²³⁸ As Neshat writes at the conclusion of the 1997 Turin catalogue that documents the series, her work is “forever inspired by Iranian poets, Forough Farokhzad, Tahereh Saffarzadeh, Simin Behbahani, Monirou Ravnipour [*sic*] and many others, whose words inscribed on these images have given special meanings to my work.”²³⁹ Confronting viewers with the words of such well-known Iranian women poets who used poetry as a site of transgression of Iranian gender and social norms, *Women of Allah* proposes that, with the help of their poetry, viewers might radically rethink their history and present, toward a reformulation of the future.

²³⁵ Talattof, 22-3. Talattof writes that the journals *Adineh* and *Dunya-ye Shokhan* “were filled with discussions of problems related to post-Revolutionary poetry, seeking to explain why poetry was in crisis” (23).

²³⁶ Ibid. According to Iranian literary critics, Talattof writes, “only a novel could encompass the complexities of life during and after the Revolution” (22).

²³⁷ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Feminism in an Islamic Republic: ‘Years of Hardship, Years of Growth,’” in *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 74.

²³⁸ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 58. Indeed, that such Iranian women poets as Simin Behbahani and Tahereh Saffarzadeh, discussed later in this chapter, continued to write and publish poetry in the post-revolutionary period, shows that Talattof’s position vis-à-vis the “crisis” of poetry is debatable.

²³⁹ *Women of Allah* (Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1997), n.p. See also Neshat’s “Acknowledgments” in the Artspeak “*Women of Allah*” catalogue for a similar statement (29).

Reaching back to these women's poems, as well as to Iranian poetry's embodied and interpretive traditions, *Women of Allah* seeks to elicit viewers' habits and skills, putting them face to face with the woman in the *chador* and engaging them in a mutual rhetorical performance with, to repeat Beeman, "rewards for the adept and setbacks for the clumsy."

Two.

Take "*Unveiling*" as a first example [1993; fig. 22]. One of the earliest photographs in the *Women of Allah* series, "*Unveiling*" represents a woman wearing a plain, black *chador*, staring out of the picture and facing the viewer.²⁴⁰ Although the black *chador* is frequently taken to indicate, in the postrevolutionary period, a woman's fundamentalist politics, in the case of "*Unveiling*," the figure clearly wears its fabric improperly. Exposing her naked chest and flagrantly disregarding the protocols of Islamic *hijab*, this figure complicates her stance toward the Islamic government, suggesting her dissent from its norms and ideology.

The lines of poetry penned upon the figure's face lend support to the notion of her oppositional stance, quoting the opening verse of the widely known poem, "My Heart Aches for the Garden" ["*Delam barayeh baghcheh misuzad*"], by Iran's most renowned female poet, Forugh Farrokhzad (1932-1965):

No one is thinking about the flowers,
no one is thinking about the fish,
no one wants to believe that the garden is dying,
that the garden's heart has swollen under the sun,
that the garden's mind is slowly, slowly,
being emptied of green memories,
and the garden's senses lie separate,
rotting in the corner.²⁴¹

Paired with the image of the badly veiled woman in "*Unveiling*," these lines suggest a staunchly anti-Revolutionary work. The poem set in the present tense, the woman laments the current treatment of "the garden" — metaphor for the Iranian nation — by extension intimating that the garden had formerly been a thriving and well-nurtured space. "*Unveiling*" can therefore be interpreted as nostalgic for the Pahlavi past that preceded the Revolution, accusing the Islamic regime of destroying the life, growth and beauty of the nation, and of having so altered people's realities and alienated them from

²⁴⁰ See Chapters One and Two for a discussion of this work's placement within *Women of Allah*.

²⁴¹ Forugh Farrokhzad, "*Delam barayeh Baghcheh Misuzad*," *Arash*, no. 7 (Tir 1964): 23-27; reprinted in *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, 49-60. The Turin *Women of Allah* catalogue quotes Michael C. Hillman's translation of this poem, from *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and her Poetry* (Washington D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1987), 119-122. I supply here my own translation, however, because Hillman's version takes some (moderate) licence with the original Persian. Although Hillman, and many others, translate the poem's title as "I feel sorry for the garden," the translation seems to me to trivialize the sentiment, and I propose here the slightly more direct translation of "My heart aches for the garden."

themselves, that even their memories have begun to putrefy and decompose. Soon, the figure grieves, no one will even be able to remember the garden's former splendor.

In quoting these lines, *Unveiling* echoes appropriations of Farrokhzad's poetry in the post-Revolutionary period, such as when, in the early 1980s, university students marched the streets of Tehran in protest of Khomeini's government while chanting these very words.²⁴² *Unveiling* thus both engages and contributes to the political, oppositional force that Farrokhzad's poetry has acquired in the post-Revolutionary era. Farrokhzad herself, celebrated and vilified in her own day for her work's open treatment of female eroticism and desire within a male-dominated genre, has come, for those opposing the current government, to represent secular freedom and female agency.²⁴³ Meanwhile, advocates of the current government condemn Farrokhzad as the antithesis of the ideal of contemporary womanhood.²⁴⁴ Invocations of Farrokhzad's poetry today thus act as a form

²⁴² Jasmin Darznik, "Forugh Farrokhzad: Her Poetry, Life, and Legacy," in *The Women's Review of Books* 23, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 23. Darznik does not give the precise date for this event. Describing a similar and more recent appropriation of poetry into the public, oppositional-political sphere, Talattof notes that Behbahani's "My Country, I will build you again," was recited by "a large number of Iranian women" protesting women's inequality, following the Iranian presidential elections of 2005 that led to the appointment of President Mahmood Ahmadinejad (30).

²⁴³ Darznik writes, "To many at the time, Farrokhzad represented a fearsome specter: an Iranian woman corrupted beyond recognition by Western influences. The verdict had as much to do with her poetry as her lifestyle. At that time, a divorced woman [such as was Farrokhzad] who lived alone but was often in the company of men was a scandalous figure. Rife with sensual details, Farrokhzad's poems were read as proof of her promiscuity and moral lassitude. In Tehran, Farrokhzad soon became the sole woman among a group of Iranian poets and writers experimenting with new artistic forms and themes. Even in this company, her outspokenness and unconventional lifestyle were often barely tolerated. Progressive journals and newspapers would run her poems alongside illustrations of a woman's naked body. More than one colleague boasted publicly about his romantic relationship with Farrokhzad. And when she entered into an eight-year-long relationship with a married man, the film director Golestan, the relationship would be a constant subject of gossip and censure. Fascinated by the details of her personal life, reviewers of the time focused almost exclusively on the erotic aspects of her poetry" (22). According to comparative literature scholar, Persis Karim, who has written about the legacy of Farrokhzad's poetry among the Iranian diaspora, "Forugh Farrokhzad is identified with the period of Iran's rapid modernization and Westernization under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, when women pushed for more comprehensive civil rights... For many... Farrokhzad represents a particular moment in the history of modern Iran that for many first-generation immigrants has become frozen in time" ("Re-writing Forugh: Writers, Intellectuals, Artists, and Forugh Farrokhzad's Legacy in the Iranian Diaspora," in *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic woman and feminine pioneer of new Persian poetry*, eds. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh, [London: I.B. Tauris, 2010], 181). See also Hillman, pages 84-86, for contemporary praise as well as critiques of Farrokhzad's life and poetry.

²⁴⁴ Najmabadi quotes Asadallah Badamchian, Advisor on Social Issues to the Head of Judiciary, as writing the following to Islamist feminist publication, *Zanan*, in response to its quotation of Farrokhzad's poetry: "that corrupt poetess, who participated in pleasure-seeking parties of the *taghuti* times [the devilish time of the old regime]. Her naked [meaning 'immodestly' dressed] pictures were portrayed in the press of those times. Her corrupt and sexual poetry is a

of resistance to the Islamic Republic, particularly with respect to its gender norms. That Farrokhzad's work was promptly banned following the Revolution — due as much to the notorious lifestyle of the poet herself as to the themes addressed in her work, both taken (by the Islamic government) to illustrate the degenerate “Westoxication”²⁴⁵ of the Pahlavi monarchy — has served only to make Farrokhzad an even more emblematic figure today and further to politicize invocations of her work.

In quoting “My Heart Aches for the Garden,” the figure in “*Unveiling*” takes up the poem's current anti-Revolutionary significance. Indeed, in her “recitation” of the poem, the figure *enacts* the very forgetting it laments. Commencing at the top of her brow and progressing in a linear fashion across her forehead, the figure faithfully reproduces the poem's first verse, which she concludes just above her right eye. However, from here, the figure's delivery begins to break down. Rather than proceed to the poem's succeeding verse, she instead begins to repeat the first line, only to abort it midway as it approaches her left eye. The figure here stutters in her recitation of the poem, now jumping forward to begin the third line, failing to reach its conclusion, and again jumping back to the second. Below her right eye, the figure momentarily resumes the verse's proper progression; however, just after she recites its second to last line — “the garden's mind is slowly, slowly being emptied of green memories” — her own memory again fails her, and rather than conclude the verse, she repeats twice the poem's title. In her stuttering delivery of the poem, the figure indicates that she too, like the garden, is beginning to perish and to forget the past. In the context of her recitation, the figure suggests that the Islamic regime has failed her, robbing her of her past and bringing upon her current suffering.

Although the poem's first verse could effectively stand alone, in stuttering, the figure invites the viewer to recall the rest of the poem as well. Indeed, her stuttering beginning at the moment that the lines of the poem meet her eyes, the figure seems to address the viewer directly, looking to the viewer as though for help in recalling and retrieving the poem. In summoning the poem's title (not itself a part of the poem), the figure even offers the viewer a mnemonic aid, helping her to come closer to conjuring the poem and its source. The figure thus appeals to the viewer, calling upon *her* memory and poetic repertoire — asking her to participate in the effort to recall the poem and recover the past.

Taking up the figure's appeal, the viewer will recall that Farrokhzad's poem significantly predates the Islamic Revolution. Written around 1964 and published posthumously in 1974, the poem addresses Iran during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (1919-1980, reign 1941-1979). The garden of Farrokhzad's poem belongs, as its later verses suggest, at the center of an urban, middle-class family home, and four of the poem's central stanzas are dedicated to the description of the individual family members — each of them representing a stereotypical, Pahlavi-era subject. Thus, Father is selfish, concerned only with his own comfort and obsessed with the great tomes glorifying Iran's past. Mother, too, neglects the realities of the present, retreating into an outmoded and superstitious world of religious piety and fear. If Father and Mother are occupied with the

condensation of inner collapse, filth, and forbidden thoughts that turn away any chaste and authentic woman” (“Feminism in an Islamic Republic,” 74).

²⁴⁵ See pages 82-84 below for a discussion of this term.

past, Brother and Sister are consumed by the West. Brother is a drunk and a nihilist who “seek[s] solace in pop philosophy” imported from the West.²⁴⁶ And Sister, finally, represents the paradigmatic, “Westoxicated,” Pahlavi-era female, vapid and substanceless, herself as artificial as the commodities she buys. Each member of the family fails in his or her own way their courtyard garden, while the poetic voice bemoans the alienation, and the loss of kinship, identity, and shared values, of 1960s Iran. “I am scared of the thought of so many useless hands/and of picturing so many estranged faces,” it laments toward the poem’s conclusion.²⁴⁷

Looking out at the viewer, the figure in “*Unveiling*” implores her to recall the poem, its lament, and the history it invokes. Quoting “My Heart Aches for the Garden”, but effectively failing to conjure the poem, “*Unveiling*” enacts the consequences of forgetting — the figure faltering in her recitation, doomed to repeat the same errors over and again. *Unveiling* thus prompts viewers to remember the poem’s critique of the social disintegration of the Pahlavi era, gesturing at the necessity of such remembering in the present context. At the same time, omitting those parts of the poem that name and identify the accused, “*Unveiling*” also leaves the target of its critique ambivalent and open, suggesting that *both* of Iran’s twentieth-century regimes erred in causing the garden’s illness and suffering. Underscoring the significance of memory and of invoking the past in the present, “*Unveiling*” links its critique of Iran’s present circumstances with those of the Pahlavi past, suggesting that both regimes contributed to Iran’s social atomization and decay. According to “*Unveiling*”, both sets of “useless hands” neglected to cultivate and nurture the nation’s flowers and fish.

Three.

In her poetic lament, the figure in “*Unveiling*” calls attention to the divisive operations of Iran’s two twentieth-century authoritarian governments, both of which [have] produced, and then [have] aimed to censor and expel, an internal Other through a rhetoric of contamination, and through hegemony over the nation’s visual and discursive landscape.

Thus, in the push to build a modern nation-state and a homogenized national identity predicated on secular values, Reza Shah (reign 1925-41) suppressed the country’s ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity, while promoting an exclusionary form of modern Iranian nationalism. In the words of historian and gender theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran comprised a spectrum of modern nationalist discourses:

Within that spectrum, one notion of Iranian modernity took Europe as its model of progress and civilization (*taraqqi va tamaddun*)... and increasingly combined that urge with recovery of pre-Islamic Iranianism. Other trends sought to

²⁴⁶ Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, “The Home and the Garden in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad,” in *Forugh Farrokhzad: Poet of Modern Iran, Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, 50.

²⁴⁷ Hillman, 120.

combine their nationalism, and the urge to catch up with Europe, not with a pre-Islamic recovery but with Islam, by projecting Shi'ism as Iranianization [*sic*] of Islam in its early centuries.²⁴⁸

Both were therefore “modern” nationalisms, with modernity not yet narrowly construed as a strictly non-Islamic possibility. Rather, the discursive equation of modernity with secularism and Islam with tradition developed over the course of the century, particularly with measures implemented by the Pahlavi state, as Islam was institutionally othered and relegated to spheres associated with regression and the anti-modern.

In the discourse of the late nineteenth-century Iranian intellectual elite, the ideological pursuit of a pre-Islamic nationalism had already been ingeniously promoted as entirely compatible with the drive to modernize along European lines:

... the obvious gap between the European model and the Muslim reality of society could be bridged by reclaiming the country's pre-Islamic heritage, which, as European scholars had discovered, shared a common ancestry with European culture. Europeanization was thus in the minds of the modernists not an alienation but a return to the true self; mimicry of Europe and national particularism could go hand in hand.²⁴⁹

What changed under Reza Shah was the institutionalization and absolutist implementation of this pursuit, whereby the monarch coercively imposed reform, often violently — at the expense of ethnic, religious, and regional diversity — in the name of creating a particular, homogeneous brand of national unity.²⁵⁰

Thus, while the full extent of Iran's diverse population was affected by Reza Shah's consolidation of power and ensuing reforms,²⁵¹ those aspects of Iranian culture and socio-political life considered Islamic were especially targeted, as the new government sought to weaken religious ideology and the influence of the Shi'a clergy. Constructing Iranian national ideology upon the glorification of Iran's pre-Islamic past, the Pahlavi state framed Islam as a contaminant, marking the seventh-century Arab

²⁴⁸ Najmabadi, “(Un)Veiling Feminism,” in *Social Text* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 33.

²⁴⁹ Houchang E. Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1993): 223.

²⁵⁰ In her compelling study of modern Islamic nationalism and formations of gendered citizenship in contemporary Iran, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, Minoo Moallem describes the secular-nationalist project of Reza Shah: “The coming to power of Reza Khan in 1921 soon after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) and the establishment of a centralized state was based on multiple foundational axes. The first axis entailed the construction of a patriotic, pseudo-nationalist ideology predicated on the revival of the pre-Islamic past and acceptance of a sacred notion of monarchy, the aim of which was to weaken the strength of religious ideology and to legitimize the hegemony of the state over other institutions, especially religious institutions. Such patriotic nationalism drew extensively on the Orientalist views of Gobineau on the Aryan race and produced a new terminology. Such discursive civilizing notions have worked through both seduction and coercion in Iran. Before the coup d'état of Reza Shah, the Westernized elite used civilizing rhetorical tropes to legitimize modernization. Under Reza Shah, the state took the initiative to impose the ideology of European civilization through the construction of a unified Iranian national will to progress and modernization” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52-57, and 63.

²⁵¹ For example, the centralization of the political system also seized power from the provincial tribal leaders.

invasion of Iran as the beginning of Iran's foreign domination and its decline to barbarism, religious fanaticism and civilizational inferiority. In order to "recuperate" Iran's authentic national identity, the Pahlavi state promulgated laws and developed institutions intended both to identify and to purge manifestations of Muslim Arab influence, suppressing and undermining components of Iranian culture that many considered to be inseparable from it.

In the state's aim to purge Islamic identity from Iran, the focus, however, remained on the most visible and conspicuous expressions of that identity. Thus, for example, as Moallem writes, "*ta'zieh* (the popular Shia performance of Karbalah) and the ceremonies of the month of Muharam were outlawed as a sign of traditionality and fanaticism..."²⁵² Similarly, immediately upon taking the throne, Reza Shah created committees, eventually consolidating them in 1935 in the Academy of Iran (*Farhangestan-e Iran*), dedicated to the reform and purification of the Persian language from foreign words.²⁵³ An expression of Reza Shah's veneration of Iran's pre-Islamic greatness, the Academy — whose words the Shah himself ultimately approved or rejected — worked to eliminate Arabic words that had been integrated into the Persian language, replacing them with pre-Islamic words and roots.²⁵⁴

More so than these reforms, however, Reza Shah's exclusionary policies pertaining to gender and dress have dominated studies aiming to address the outcomes and repercussions of the Pahlavi, secular-modernist program. When it came to Iran's "woman question," debates had been gaining momentum at least since the mid-nineteenth century, with both religious and secular modernists agreeing that reform needed to be made. Distinguished by a variety of discourses, there was yet no singular voice standing for Islamic truth. Thus, for example, whereas a cleric such as Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri might have grounded his objection to educational reforms for women according to the

²⁵² Moallem, 67.

²⁵³ Mehrdad Kia, "Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (April 1998): 22-3.

²⁵⁴ Language purification as a means of excising Arabic words and claiming a uniquely Persian and pre-Islamic vocabulary had already been advocated (and opposed) by the mid-nineteenth century in Iran. The debates around the issue of language purification are revealing of their implications and the ideologies underlying them. Thus, opponents of language reform, "who were for the most part members of the traditional political and cultural elite during the Qajar period... claimed that the intermingling of Arabic and Persian was responsible for the beauty and vitality of the Persian language... [and] argued that language purification would weaken Persian vocabulary and cut off Iranians cultural ties to their literary heritage and their Islamic and Arab neighbors" (ibid., 22). Supporters of a radical purification of Persian felt that the presence of Arabic words in Persian only served as a reminder of "foreign domination over Iranian culture. These nationalists, a group of nationalist army officers and anti-Islam and anti-Arab intellectuals, believed that the purification of Persian was the first step toward restoring Iranians' pride in their culture and civilization. According to these individuals, Persian was an Indo-European language which had been polluted by Arabic, a Semitic language imposed on Iranians by the Arab Muslims..." (ibid., 22).

interpretation of Islamic precepts, his opponents challenged him on the basis on the same texts.²⁵⁵

Similarly, women's rights activism in the early 1900s brought together both secular and religious women, united in seeking reforms for women in education and marriage and divorce laws. The Society for Patriotic Women, for example, was composed of women from both sides of the religious divide. Moreover, while women may have disagreed on the issue of the *hijab*, advocating or opposing it was not the categorically divisive marker that it later came to be. Thus, a woman such as Muzayyan al-Saltanah, could be a tireless activist of education, could publish secular women's poetry in the women's journal she edited (*Shukufeh*), and could be vehemently opposed to unveiling.²⁵⁶

Reza Shah effectively put an end to such active debates with his mapping of the woman question onto the domain of the state. With his dissolution of independent women's organizations and publications in the early 1930s, the concomitant establishment of a single, state-sponsored women's rights organization (*Kanun-i Banuvan*), and the 1936 compulsory ban on women's veiling, Reza Shah produced a decisive split between Iranian modernists. Pitting those who had once been unified in the promotion of women's reform radically against one another, such measures divided them on the basis of their stance with respect to religion and the veil, ultimately claiming feminism as an exclusively secular modern possibility.²⁵⁷

Overall, such policies, and the state's increasing marginalization of the Islamic clergy, contributed to the widening rift in Iran's population, producing what one analyst has referred to as "the situation of 'two cultures' in Iran":

Reza Shah's work for rapid modernization from above, along with his militantly secularist cultural... program, helped create the situation of 'two cultures' in Iran, which became more acute in later decades. The upper and new middle classes became increasingly Westernized and scarcely understood the traditional or religious culture of most of their compatriots. The urban bazaar classes continued to follow the ulama [clergy], however politically cowed most of the ulama were in the Reza Shah period. These classes associated 'the way things should be' more with Islam than with the West or with the new myth of pre-Islamic Iran, whose virtues were essentially Western.²⁵⁸

Ultimately, in his drive to modernize Iran, Reza Shah censored and suppressed a sizeable component of the country which identified with Islam as both a cultural and religious force. Producing the discursive opposition between modernity and Islam, Reza Shah — and then his successor and son, Mohammad Reza Shah — paved the way for the clergy's prescriptive discourse of an 'authentic' Islam hostile to the modernizing state. The consequences for the future of Iran were severe.

²⁵⁵ Najmabadi, "(Un)Veiling Feminism," 35-6.

²⁵⁶ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic," 76.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 102-3.

As the 1960s and 1970s bore on, and as dissatisfaction with the increasingly oppressive and dictatorial, pro-Western (and U.S. influenced) government of Mohammad Reza Shah grew, various anti-imperialist movements — comprising socialist, Marxist, social democratic, as well as Islamist ones — gained strength, crying out against the Pahlavi regime.

Despite their marked differences, these oppositional movements shared condemnation of the *Gharbzadegi*, or “Westoxication,” of the imperialist social order.²⁵⁹ Introduced, as Moallem explains, by Iranian cultural critic, Jalal-e Al-e Ahmad, in his “1962 book of the same name... [the term] was popularized and very widely used by secular and religious oppositional movements to describe the colonizing effects of Westernization.”²⁶⁰ According to this rhetoric, the Pahlavi regime had corrupted Iran’s identity, and thus needed — along with other manifestations of the imperialist order — to be eliminated. As a result, *zan-e gharbzadeh*, or the Westoxicated woman — a materialistic, individualistic, and purportedly sexually-available woman — came to represent the degeneracy and moral corruption of the Pahlavi era. The “ultimate symbol of state legitimacy and its imperialist supporters,” she too needed to be purged and “detoxified” from the Iranian social sphere.²⁶¹

Another notion that had gained ascendancy among the various counter-imperialist groups was that of *shahadat* (martyrdom). According to Mansoor Ehsan:

The notion of *shahadat* (martyrdom) was employed before the 1979 revolution, particularly after the advent of the guerrilla movements in Iran during the late sixties, to glorify the heroic nature of those who gave their lives opposing the Shah. Both secular and religious opposition to the Pahlavi regime adopted the title of martyr for their political heroes, associating the bearer with a sacrificial act motivated by his/her political ideals. [The figure of the martyr] also provided a counterbalance to the notions of individualism and the pursuit of individual

²⁵⁹ Milani points out that this anti-West discourse was already present in the mid-1940s: “... in 1946, as Iran was rushing toward modernization... a holder of a high position in the Iran-British Petroleum Company, a twenty-year resident of Europe and America, wrote a book dedicated in its entirety to the loss of Iranian cultural identity. Fakhr ed-Din Shadman, in *Taskhir-e Tammadon Farrangi* [Possessed by Western Culture], reacts bitterly against the blind imitation and idealization of the West by Iranians. With passion, Shadman sketches the portraits of Westernized pseudointellectuals who personify nothing more than arrogance and ignorance. He presents them as lacking a firm grasp of their own culture or of that of the West, as perpetrators of trivialities and confusion. He argues that the only logical outcome of such mimicking will be an unstable community in conflict. Shadman sees the blending of Islam with technological advances and cultural self-assertion as the only salvation” (155).

²⁶⁰ Moallem, 207.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77. According to Moallem, this “euphoric intoxication and poisoning by the West” was challenged by women within the various oppositional groups: “Women sought new models of femininity by distancing themselves from the emphasized model of femininity predominant under the shah..... Each oppositional group defined a particular dress code for women. Women identifying with leftist urban guerrilla groups wore trousers, long shirts, and sport shoes, while Islamic guerrillas wore head scarves to distinguish themselves from fundamentalist women, who wore the long black *chador*...” (*ibid.*, 77-78).

interest that were entering the Iranian cultural field through modernization. The martyr became a symbol of anti-imperialist struggle.²⁶² With the rise and eventual assumption of power by Khomeini, these notions were ultimately grafted onto a specifically religious, indigenous discursive space — one that proposed to link all subjects oppressed by the Shah’s regime through culture and religion rather than through class associations and imported concepts deemed ill fitting to the particularity of Iranian society²⁶³:

Such unification was important for bringing together the various groups participating in the revolution and for reconciling their contradictory demands in order to create an oppositional framework that worked effectively to put an end to the shah’s reign. This unification enabled a position beyond the modernist categories of worker, laborer, and proletariat, and created space for fluidity, multiplicity, and the inclusion of various classes and groups. In addition, this category allowed the disempowered to be addressed not as an abstract category but as people located in particular cultural and religious traditions.²⁶⁴

Nevertheless, such “unification” also entailed the suppression and erasure of difference, as those participating in the other counter-imperialist oppositional movements were either incorporated into the religious nationalist community, marginalized, killed or expelled.²⁶⁵ Thus, as with the Pahlavi nationalist project, the construction of the Islamic Republic entailed its own categories of inclusion and exclusion — each regime claiming to represent the authentic Iran, suppressing difference in the name of an absolutist, unified, and homogeneous state.

According to Beeman’s insightful analysis of the Islamic revolutionary rhetoric, although the “causes of the revolution were rooted in very real economic and political problems facing the Iranian nation... these problems were... transformed into symbolic issues of profound depth through the rhetoric of the clergy”:

The rhetoric of the revolutionary leaders was powerful because it dealt with the core symbolic issues of Iranian civilization... — the internal versus the external, hierarchy versus equality. The Pahlavi regime ... [was] insensitive to these issues, and... spoke to Iranian citizens in terms of an alien, largely western set of categories — modern versus traditional, world power versus second-class nation, democracy versus dictatorship, to name a few. The rhetoric of the Islamic leaders struck deep in the hearts of Iranian citizens of all social classes — in many ways it was irresistible — because it dwelt on all that was meaningful in Iranian life.²⁶⁶

One of Khomeini’s powerful, discursive *tours de force* derived from his identification of the cause of the revolution with the martyrdom of Imam Hossein — revered Shi’a figure

²⁶² Mansoor Ehsan, *Politics of Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1992), 13-14.

²⁶³ Moallem, 102.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Moallem further writes: the “cultural nationalist framework of an Islamic vision... was used to undermine the diversity and particularities of the revolutionary struggles from the demands of ethnic and religious minorities to peasant revolts. It also blurred differences between urban and rural classes” (104).

²⁶⁶ Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 208.

and grandson of Mohammad, martyred at Karbala after refusing to pledge allegiance to the Umayyad caliph Yazid, whose clan, Shi'a Muslims believe, illegitimately took over Mohammad's succession after the Prophet's death.²⁶⁷ Hossein thus represents spiritual purity and truth for Shi'a Muslims. However, through his masterful rhetoric, Khomeini transformed the plight of Hossein against the Umayyad caliphate to the struggle of the Iranian nation against external corruption. According to this picture, the Shah and the United States represented the abhorrent forces of such corruption, and by purging the nation of them, Iran would also attain internal purity. In Beeman's words, "[o]nce the rhetoric of the revolutionary symbolic world was accepted, there was no place at all for the shah. He was literally 'defined out' of the Iranian cultural universe."²⁶⁸

This rhetoric of expulsion and purification extended also to the Westoxicated woman:

In the first months and years following the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in February 1979, the symbolism crafted in the previous decades between woman and culture was translated into the most horrific meanings: 'revolutionary purification and cleansing campaigns' targeted dismissal of secular women professionals as 'remnants of the old regime.' Having located the site of 'social sickness' on the bodies of women, eradication of 'Westitis' from Islamo-Iranian culture translated into repeated waves of attacks against unveiled women and the eventual imposition of the veil and an elaborate 'code of modesty.' The continued resistance of some women against the strict enactments of the dress code was likened to a sickness — a willful sickness or a sickness of the will — against which the rest of society needed to be inoculated through veiling of women.²⁶⁹

In the words of one proponent of this ideology, what Iranian society needed was "a kind of social vaccination, vaccination of the Muslim man and woman, vaccination of our pure and virtuous sisters. One cannot say that there should be no microbes in the world, that there should be no diseases. . . . What shall we do against diseases? We must preserve ourselves. We must quarantine ourselves."²⁷⁰ As a result, mandatory veiling was swiftly reinstated, while other laws that had been introduced in the Pahlavi era and viewed as victories of the women's rights movement (such as the Family Protection Act), were rejected, deemed as un-Islamic and illegitimate corruptions of the imperialist state.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ The division between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims dates to around 650 a.d., following the Prophet Mohammad's death and his succession by Abu Bak'r, Mohammad's father-in-law. For those who believed that Mohammad had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor, Ali and his dynasty — including his sons Hassan and Hossein — remained the spiritual leader (Imam), although the caliphs were their temporal leaders. "The valorization of martyrdom among the Shiites," Ehsan writes, "is inseparably tied to the events of Karbala and o the persona of Imam Hosayn [Hossein] who is popularly referred to as the Lord of Martyrs (Sayyid al-Shohada)" (5-6).

²⁶⁸ Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 211.

²⁶⁹ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic," 60-1.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Thus, the discourse of the Islamic Republic, in at least one significant way, effectively mirrored that of the Pahlavi period, claiming singular authority over Iranian identity and producing its others as corrupt, foreign contaminants needing to be cleansed from Iran's system.

Four.

If “*Unveiling*” encourages the viewer to realize such connections and parallels, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* imparts a very different kind of message, responding to the former's ambivalence with a commanding, militant stance [1995; fig. 2].

Visually, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* supplants the woman in “*Unveiling*,” rejecting any potential manifestation or memory of Pahlavi womanhood the figure in the earlier artwork might have sustained. Compositionally similar, both works present a figure at the center of the photograph, facing forward and looking at the viewer straight on. However, whereas the opening in the figure's *chador* in *Unveiling* reveals a vertical strip of her bared chest, *Rebellious Silence* fills that space with a shiny, black rifle that squarely divides the woman's face and body in two. Properly holding her *chador* closed beneath her chin, this figure shows no hesitation, her self-possession underscored by the thick, bold lines of text extending across her face.

With these lines, *Rebellious Silence* appropriates and combines parts of two different poems by contemporary Iranian woman poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008):²⁷²

Oh, self-sacrificing soul [*Ay az jan gozashteh*],
With your warm hands,
Take my hands,
I am your poet,
And with this broken body of mine,
I have come to join you,
Till the day of judgment,
When we can together rise up.
Oh good,
Oh my brother,
The night is pierced by the sounds of your shots.²⁷³

Quoting from Saffarzadeh's book of poetry, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* [*Bey'at ba Bidari*], published in 1980 and written in support of the Islamic Revolution, *Rebellious*

²⁷² Perhaps the most well-known Islamist female poet in Iran, Saffarzadeh was a strong advocate of the Islamic Revolution, and ran for parliament in the new government (though she was not elected to office). Her recent death was marked by tributes by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and President Mahmood Ahmadinejad, among other leaders of the current Iranian government.

²⁷³ My translation (from *Rebellious Silence*). The poems are “Journey of the Awakened” [*Safar-e bidaran*] and “At the Summit of Wakefulness” [*Feraz-e bidari*], from Tahereh Saffarzadeh, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* [*Bey'at ba Bidari: barguzidah-i shi'rha-yi 1356-58*] (Tehran: Intisharat-i Hamdami, Fall 1979), 28-53 and 59-69. For alternate translations, see Milani, 170-172.

Silence channels the poet's revolutionary zeal.²⁷⁴ Praising Khomeini, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards [*pasdaran*], and the martyrs who died fighting for the revolutionary cause, the poems in *Allegiance with Wakefulness* address these figures throughout as "the angel of Qom," "the light of my eyes," "lonely hero," and so on. Milani describes Saffarzadeh as defiant poet whose work, published from the sixties on, was initially feminine, sensual and erotic, while critical of Iranian patriarchal mores. Increasingly denouncing the country's social injustices and corruption, Saffarzadeh's poetry, by the mid-1970s, had begun to reveal an explicit disenchantment with Pahlavi rule, the westernization of Iran, and the materialistic and individualistic culture of her compatriots. Like others in her day, Saffarzadeh found in Islam a means of escaping Iran's social and political inequities, and she was among the many women who advocated wearing the *chador* during the revolutionary uprisings as a means of expressing opposition to the Pahlavi regime and of reclaiming indigenous Iranian values.²⁷⁵ According to Milani, Saffarzadeh's "turn" to Islam at once expressed her desire for a new, more just and equitable, social order, and was motivated by transgression of contemporary social norms, Islam "allow[ing] her easier access to and participation in public life."²⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Milani criticizes Saffarzadeh's political and poetic transformation — her ultimate alignment with the militant interpretation of Islam promoted by Khomeini, and the turn it represented in her poetry, accusing *Allegiance*

²⁷⁴As an educated, upper-class urban individual growing up in Iran, Neshat would undoubtedly have been familiar with Farrokhzad's widely renowned poetry. Whether Neshat would have heard of Saffarzadeh before she left Iran for the U.S. in 1975 is less likely. Although Saffarzadeh had published a collection of short stories, *Peyvandha-ye Talkh* [*Bitter Unions*], 1963, and several collections of poetry — *Rahgozar-e Mahtab* [*Moonlight Passerby*], 1963, *Tanin Dar Delta* [*Resonance in the Bay*], 1971, and *Sad Va Bazovan* [*Dam and Arms*], 1972 — before Neshat left Iran, she did not achieve widespread acclaim until publication of her next poetry collection, *Safar-e Panjom* [*The Fifth Journey*], in 1978 (Milani 158-9). Saffarzadeh's success with the latter publication was followed by that of her next poetry collection, *Bey'at ba Bidari* [*Allegiance with Wakefulness*], 1980, written in staunch support of the Islamic Revolution. If Farrokhzad was the most widely known Iranian pre-revolutionary women poet, Saffarzadeh was perhaps her post-revolutionary counterpart.

²⁷⁵ Significantly, Saffarzadeh pursued her master's degree in creative writing at the University of Iowa, and published a collection of poems, *Red Umbrella* (1969), that Milani characterizes as uninhibited in its expression of sensual themes (Ibid., 158-162). In light of some of Neshat's statements regarding her attraction to Iranians' revolutionary commitment (see pages 3-4, Chapter One), it is tempting to consider her interest in Saffarzadeh as having been stimulated by their parallel trajectories, both of them Iranian women receiving M.F.A. degrees in the U.S. Saffarzadeh might have represented to Neshat an example of the "person [I would have been] had I stayed [in Iran]." In that sense, Neshat's self-representation and assumption of Saffarzadeh's voice in certain *Women of Allah* works could be understood in terms of the artist's attempt at thinking through that person, years later.

²⁷⁶ Milani, 154, and 167-8, respectively. See also Leonardo P. Alishan, "Tahereh Saffarzadeh: From the Wasteland to the Imam": "In an interview..., the poet associates her increasing interest in Islam with 'my own anti-oppression, non-compromising, and justice-seeking stance and the justice-seeking, uncompromising nature of Shi'ism and the oppressiveness of our time which inevitably provokes a righteous person to rebel and increases religious inclinations'" (in *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1/4 [1982]: 198).

with *Wakefulness* of “revolutionary proselytizing” and of replacing the feminine and feminist individual expressed in the earlier poems with a voice that is “genderless,” “asexual,” and “submerged in a collective self.”²⁷⁷ According to Milani, these poems reveal the “suppression” of Saffarzadeh’s “previous feminist voice.”²⁷⁸

Neshat’s photograph, however, and its rearticulation of Saffarzadeh’s poem, suggests not the figure’s suppression, but rather the rearticulation of her activist voice outside of Westernized notions of femininity and according to the visual and discursive terms of the Islamic Revolution. With her rifle, and with the wide banner of space free of script around her eyes, emphasizing her stare, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* asserts her unyielding presence. Claiming and guarding her *chador*, the figure, far from fading away from visibility, acts as a vocal, active and public participant in the revolutionary and post-Revolutionary process.²⁷⁹ As Najmabadi claims, “[t]he rise of the Islamist movement in the 1970s in Iran signified the emergence of a new political sociability and the dominance of a new discourse” within which gender was central:²⁸⁰

“The woman question” acquired immediacy and urgency, not only for the discontented but even more so for the supporters of the new order. In particular, female supporters of the Islamic Republic were placed in a position to take responsibility for its misogyny: to deny it, to justify it, to challenge it, to oppose it, but not to ignore it.²⁸¹

This new form of political sociability was enabled, writes Najmabadi, as a result of the new constitution, encoding “Khomeini’s doctrine of rulership of jurisprudence.”²⁸² According to this doctrine, while “the jurispudent is granted the power of political rule and the constitution is said to be derived from canonical texts, every citizen by virtue of rights of citizenship becomes entitled to take charge of these texts and to exercise power of interpretation.”²⁸³ Thus, while the nation is not necessarily predicated on the equality of its citizens, it is nonetheless grounded as a modern polity composed of individual citizens responsible for and entitled to claims with respect to the state. As a result, “activism and feminism have become authenticated, ironically opening new possibilities for growth of all kinds of feminisms,” now yielding “new configurations of Islam, revolution, and feminism.”²⁸⁴

Thus, with her words and her physical comportment, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* mirrors the revolutionary warrior to whom she addresses her poem — her “brother” in the unified Muslim community constructed within Islamist revolutionary

²⁷⁷ Milani, 150.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 154.

²⁷⁹ As Moallem asserts, “It is a mistake to read women’s acceptance of the fundamentalist encouragement to wear the black chador as a sign of either passivity or religiosity. Women perceived it rather as a gendered invitation to political participation and as a sign of membership, belonging, and complicity” (110).

²⁸⁰ Najmabadi, “(Un)Veiling Feminism,” 30.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 30.

²⁸² Ibid., 44.

²⁸³ Ibid., 44.

²⁸⁴ Najmabadi, “Feminism in an Islamic Republic,” 60.

discourse, in which, Moallem argues, the tropes of the “warrior brother and veiled sister” established “different but complementary gender identities” in the creation of a newly-envisioned state comprising proud, militant, and politically aware citizens.²⁸⁵ The figure in *Rebellious Silence*, that is, assumes her role as sister and public citizen in relation to her male counterpart. However, in voicing and reconfiguring Saffarzadeh’s poem, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* even exceeds and surpasses authorized expressions of female political sociability promoted within contemporary Islamist discourse and representational tropes. According to Moallem, although many women had participated in and taken up arms in support of the revolutionary movement, “the Islamic state officially institutionalized the role of warrior only for men,” pervasively infusing and transforming Iran’s public spaces with its masculine ideology.²⁸⁶ Since the revolution, streets and alleyways of cities across Iran have been renamed to recall martyrs of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, while billboards at the entrances to towns display the pictures of martyrs from those localities.²⁸⁷ By contrast, “no women’s names were used in the renaming of public spaces.”²⁸⁸ Moreover, Moallem claims, although women’s armed participation in the revolution “remained alive in the spheres of representation and popular, social memory,” in reality, in the postrevolutionary period and during the Iran-Iraq war, women were displaced to positions “behind the battlefield” (*posht-e jebheh*).²⁸⁹ Recasting earlier “gender-neutral revolutionary notions,” following the revolution, women “were expected to perform a variety of tasks, from raising future martyrs to nursing, cooking and cleaning...”²⁹⁰ Nevertheless, even in representations from this immediate postrevolutionary moment, women are depicted as helpers, typically alongside male warriors and sons [figs. 70-71]. When alone and armed, they appear contemplative, represented away from the battlefield and as though their moment of active militance has already been accomplished and surpassed [fig. 72]. *Rebellious Silence*, by contrast, rejects the role of women as merely the mothers, sisters and spouses of martyrs; looking squarely forward while holding her gun, this figure boldly claims her own role as warrior and martyr.

In reinterpreting her position, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* might thus be said to exercise her right as a citizen within the Islamic state. Indeed, the figure does so not only by way of her physical presence, but also through her poem. For the figure in *Rebellious Silence* not only pieces together fragments of discrete poems by Saffarzadeh, but also translates and reinterprets those fragments into a vocabulary that is distinctly *hers*. The viewer familiar with Saffarzadeh’s Islamist poetry of the late seventies, while recognizing her works’ revolutionary address and tone, might therefore notice subtle differences between Saffarzadeh’s poems and that of the figure, who amends

²⁸⁵ Moallem, 107.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁸⁷ See also, Sreberny-Mohammadi: “With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the most common decoration of buildings, both inside and out, are huge wall murals or photographs of Khomeini and other religious leaders, visual icons of a charismatic political movement” (143).

²⁸⁸ Moallem, 109.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

Saffarzadeh's "Oh, martyr" to "Oh, self-sacrificing one," and the poet's "wounded soul" to "this broken body of mine," as well as other changes.²⁹¹ The poem produced in *Rebellious Silence* is thus recursive, in dialogue with Saffarzadeh's poems, while also transforming them. In revising Saffarzadeh's "martyr" to her own "self-sacrificing one," the figure in *Rebellious Silence* expands the referential scope of her address, encompassing not only those who died for the cause of the Islamic Revolution, but also those — male or female — who remained alive while participating in its momentum.²⁹²

At the same time, in its reformulation of the poem, *Rebellious Silence* addresses not only martyrs and self-effacing revolutionaries, but also the artwork's viewer. For in the context of the image, the "you" of the poem confronts the viewer at whom the figure directs her gaze. Speaking in the present and recasting Saffarzadeh's words decades after the poet's reverent address to the dead, *Rebellious Silence* faces the living — those perhaps now wary of the outcomes of the Revolution. Addressing the viewer as one of the self-sacrificing revolutionary souls, *Rebellious Silence* encourages the viewer to recall the past and remember the violence and censorship of the late Pahlavi period, the injustices that propelled the revolutionary movement. Calling upon the viewer to transcend space, time, and the photographic frame in order to join hands with her, the figure also asks the viewer temporarily to understand himself aligned with her in space and gesture, sharing a common ground. In bidding the viewer to take her hands into his or her own, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* proposes to convey her poetic wisdom through affect, gesture, and touch — recalling those bodily habits associated with poetic recitation

²⁹¹ I suspect that Neshat in fact used Milani's translations of Saffarzadeh's poems from *Allegiance with Wakefulness* for her own citations of these poems, therefore actually translating them *back* into Persian from Milani's English. That *Rebellious Silence* only appropriates those fragments of Saffarzadeh's poems included in Milani's *Veils and Words*, and repeats in Persian translation some of Milani's own amendments of the poems (Milani's poetic license as a translator), are some of the details that make me think this was the case. Indeed, Neshat may not even have known that she appropriated from two different poems, as Milani suggests her translations, which are dispersed throughout her pages addressing Saffarzadeh, are all from a single poem called "Allegiance with Wakefulness" — though there is no such poem by Saffarzadeh — and Neshat later reproduces the same mistake in the 1997 Turin catalogue, *Women of Allah*. Although this circumstance speaks volumes about Neshat's diasporic situation, I do not address the issue of Neshat's exile in this context as my analysis here concerns the encounter between the viewer and the work of art.

²⁹² Although "*ay az jan gozashteh*" need not necessarily refer to Islamic revolutionaries, the expressions "*az khod gozashteh*" and "*az jan gozashteh*" became identified with revolutionary sentiment, as anthropologist Mary Hegland observed while studying the Islamic Revolution from a village near Shiraz. According to Hegland, these terms expressed a hardened attitude (literally, the willingness to "abandon oneself" or to "abandon life") toward the Shah's regime as it committed oppressive atrocities. Hegland writes: "People felt this emotion and gained this attitude through hearing about or participating in events in which governments forces treated people with violence and injustice... Villagers reported to me their horror, fury, and frustration upon hearing about such events, as well as their resolve that they would never rest until the shah and the government that did such inhuman things to their fellow Iranians no longer existed..." (Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], 116-117).

— as well as through her words.²⁹³ *Rebellious Silence* thus invites the viewer to accept — and even momentarily to occupy and embody — an unfamiliar position, a different experience, and a different understanding.

Nevertheless, the figure's entreaty is ultimately more coercive than inviting, interpellating the viewer as a committed and unwavering revolutionary subject. Unlike "*Unveiling*", in which the figure's stuttering delivery provokes the viewer's willing participation in the recovery of the lost poem, the figure in *Rebellious Silence* emphatically and unilaterally sets the terms for her relationship with the viewer. Although in re-writing Saffarzadeh's "martyr" as a "self-sacrificing soul" she allows the viewer to live, the figure keeps her gun at the ready, silencing and censoring the viewer's voice, promising to police him, "Till the day of judgment/When we can together rise up."

Five.

Although *Rebellious Silence* demands from its viewer a certain recalling of the past, the memories it cultivates reach back only so far, the rhetoric of the figure's symbolic world encompassing only hostile binaries. Neshat explored such tensions in a number of the *Women of Allah* photographs: the works produced in 1994, such as *Faceless* and *Allegiance with Wakefulness* [figs. 31 and 73], as well as *Speechless* of 1996 [fig. 42], are especially coercive in their imposition of a rigid, singular worldview. Yet Neshat opened and closed her series (in 1993 and 1997) with works that offer different realizations and alternative modes of engagement with the figure. Only four of the *Women of Allah* artworks quote Saffarzadeh's Islamist poetry — and these are the works that stage an immediate threat of violence with the figure always holding her gun at the ready.²⁹⁴ By contrast, the earliest and latest artworks within *Women of Allah* are devoid of guns, and quote mainly from Farrokhzad's secular poetry, suggesting a greater

²⁹³ In this way, *Rebellious Silence* recalls Walter Benjamin's descriptions of the art of storytelling in "The Storyteller." In that essay, Benjamin describes storytelling as the ability to exchange experiences, and claims that the story becomes integrated into the listener's memory and experience through the storyteller's adept coordination not only of his voice, but also of his bodily gestures: "storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling, *the hand* plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures..." (*Illuminations* [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 108, my italics). See *The Ethical Soundscape*, pages 25-28, for an analysis of the relevance of Benjamin's descriptions to Hirschkind's understanding of the practices of the Egyptian cassette sermon listeners who form the focus of his study.

²⁹⁴ *Faceless*, *Rebellious Silence*, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, and *Speechless* are the only four works within the series that I have been able definitely to identify as quoting from Saffarzadeh's poetry. Although *Seeking Martyrdom, variations #1* and *2*, also cite lines directed to a revolutionary martyr, and these two works are thematically related to the core *Women of Allah* photographs, Neshat indicates that the text inscribed on these works was taken from "a contemporary cassette tape sold in Iran" (in the file "Text Translations" at the Artspeak Gallery Archives, Vancouver, Canada).

preference for the more ethical engagements and encounters elicited in these works.²⁹⁵ Therefore, heeding Hannah Arendt's suggestion cited in this chapter's epigraph, it is in closing that I turn to two such works, in order to find an approximate articulation of the wisdom they propose we live by.

If most of the photographs within *Women of Allah* engage the viewer directly — whether through the gaze or bodily comportment of the figure, or through her words — *Untitled* presents a unique instance of an ostensibly monologic, rather than dialogic, revelation [1996; fig. 44]. In this photograph, its close-up cropping emphasizing the solitary state of the figure represented, the woman holds her fingers to her slightly parted lips as though startled by the recollection of something nearly forgotten.

What the figure might suddenly have recalled are the words surfacing on the back of her hand, beginning with Farrokhzad's "My Heart Aches for the Garden," whose title and first four lines vigorously march up her fingers toward her mouth and her dry, cracked lips, as though to nourish and revive them with their memory. However, the figure in *Untitled* recalls not only Farrokhzad's secular lament, pairing the poet's lines also with several other layers of words written on the back on her hand. In the large bold script at the center of her hand appears the Islamic (and therefore Arabic) invocation, *Ya qamar-e bani Hashem*, "Oh, moon of the family of Hashem," invoking Abbas, one of the descendents of the hallowed clan in the Quraysh tribe into which Muhammad was born.²⁹⁶ Surrounding this invocation and written behind it in a tight, winding pattern, is more writing still, now weaving together fragments of poems by both Saffarzadeh and Farrokhzad.²⁹⁷ The inscriptions are careful and elaborate, maintaining their distinction even as they wind into and layer over one another, all while taking into account the topography of the figure's hand, its varying scales, wrinkles and contours. In uniting these various utterances — the secular lament, the Muslim invocation, and the Islamist call — such that they are at once legible and aesthetically beautiful, the figure in *Untitled* seems to come to the incipient realization of their contingency, her startled gasp at the moment of this realization nearly audible. Thus, *Untitled* recalls what the figure in *Rebellious Silence*, with her rigid, unwavering stance, would not — that, like the lines on

²⁹⁵ Neshat indicates in an interview that by the end of her series, her work shifted away from its focus on guns, "because violence played no role in this subject for me" (Bertucci, 84-87). The first three photographs in the *Women of Allah* series — *I Am its Secret*, *Offered Eyes*, and *Unveiling* — quote Farrokhzad's "I will greet the sun again" (in the first case), and Farrokhzad's "My heart aches for the garden" (in the second two). The final four photographs in the series including inscriptions — *Untitled* [fig. 44], *Whispers* [fig. 41], *Careless*, and *Him* [fig. 42] — cite Farrokhzad's "My Heart Aches for the Garden" (in the first case), Simin Behbahani's *That Man*, *My Companion* (in the second two cases), and Farrokhzad's "Divine Rebellion" (in the fourth).

²⁹⁶ As art historian Sussan Babaie notes, this invocation "does not ordinarily register in scripted form but rather in spoken and aural expressions," further emphasizing the oral/aural dimension that Neshat's photographs elicit ("Locating the 'Modern' in 'Islamic' Arts," *Getty Research Journal* 3 [2011]: 137).

²⁹⁷ The outermost text of the circle reads, *Man az to mimiram, amma to zendegiye manee* ("I will die from you, but you are my life") — a fragment of a poem that Neshat identifies as by Farrokhzad in the file, "Text Translations" at the Artspeak Gallery Archives, although I have not yet determined its precise source.

the back of her hand, the memories and histories they invoke can neither be eliminated nor disconnected from one another, or from herself.

In her sudden recollection, the figure in *Untitled* begins to weave connections — between secular and Muslim feminists, between Islam and modernity, and between secular and Muslim Iranians more broadly — imagining the possibility of their coincidence and coexistence rather than their opposition and hostility, and offering hope for the breaking down of the social dichotomies constructed by the Pahlavi and Islamic regimes.²⁹⁸ *Untitled* thus embraces history and memory, reversing the “trend within which... modernism and Islam, feminism and cultural authenticity, have been constructed as exclusionary categories.”²⁹⁹ Appropriating, revising and reformulating these distinct poetic, religious, and historical expressions, *Untitled* refuses the rifts forged by previous eras. Her mouth just opening, *Untitled* begins to speak “in a new combined tongue.”³⁰⁰

If *Untitled* stages this realization as a personal one, *I Am its Secret* openly shares its wisdom with the viewer [1993; fig. 1]. In this photograph, a pair of eyes gazes at the viewer from a black *chador* while a pattern of Persian script in red and black ink winds around the woman’s face. If some viewers might be disturbed that woman’s *chador* covers her mouth, Forugh Farrokhzad’s poem, “I will greet the sun again” [“*Beh aftab dobareh salami khaham dad*”], nevertheless concerns the insistent presence, rather than absence, of the woman who speaks. Telling of bliss in a form of death that marks not closure and finality, but rather rebirth and the continued dialogue and exchange between past and present, the poetic “I” imagines offering her greeting to the sun, the river, and her childhood self, while declaring she will “bring all the flowers I picked/from the other side of the wall.” In her refiguration of the poem, the woman in the photograph corporealizes its expression of the sustained existence and presence of things, while the poem’s first words, “to the sun,” placed at the center of the woman’s face with the

²⁹⁸ In “Feminism in an Islamic Republic”, Najmabadi writes that the contemporary feminist publication *Zanan* — which speaks from a Muslim perspective — has since its inception in 1992, contributed to the rearticulation of contemporary forms of sociability in Iran. *Zanan* at once translates from Western feminist journals, reaches out to Iranian women living abroad, and publishes essays by secular as well as Muslim writers. In so doing, *Zanan* “weav[es] new textual connections between Muslim women and Western feminism,” departs from “the state of suspicion and hostility between women who reside in Iran and those who, in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, either left or were forced to emigrate,” and does away with “the old exclusionary categories” (73). Most significantly for this study, *Zanan* has published contributions about the life and poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, bringing into the fold of an Islamic journal the work of a poet associated with the secular, pre-revolutionary period. In Najmabadi’s words, the journal’s editor, Shahla Sherkat, thus “projects her efforts as a response to Farrukhzad’s yearnings, and by extension to aspirations of that generation of women who identified with her. She causes the wall that has been laboriously built by both sides of the secular/religious and the traditional/modernist divide to crumble, and she reaches for connections with secular women of a previous generation. She thus begins to construct a combined genealogy for Iranian feminism... By inventing new visions and re-visions of Islam... *Zanan* has audaciously messed up our comforting categories of Islamic and secular” (74-7).

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

concentric circles moving outwards, suggest mobility, openness and endless possibility. In the context of this image, the wisdom that the figure's poetic invocation imparts is that past and present cannot be ruptured; to the viewer who hopes for the rescue and relief of the beautiful woman from Islam and her *chador*, the woman's response suggests not only that such a break with the past cannot be, but that it might not even be desirable.

Finally, although the poem in *I Am its Secret* appears in Persian, the figure's poetic response can be understood by all viewers — by those who can read and understand the meaning of the words *and* by those who view the words as “mere” evocative visual pattern. Covering her mouth, this figure claims that we do not need to hear or understand her words to grasp her message. For all viewers truly engaging *I Am its Secret* must do so physically, moving their heads and bodies along with the circular movements and visual rhythm of the words. Through such affective correspondence, Neshat's photograph gestures at a form of corporeal dialogue and exchange with the Other that also involves engaging, if only temporarily, its worldview, eliciting a vision of ethical coexistence in which bodies might be refigured and remade through their encounters.

CONCLUSION

Shirin Neshat's series of thirty-eight photographs, *Women of Allah* (1993-1997), propelled the artist to rapid artworld fame, the works' ostensible claim to describe the condition of women in Islam timely and provocative, captivating (as well as infuriating) viewers and instantly securing Neshat's place on the international art stage. During the five years of *Women of Allah's* production, Neshat's photographs were regularly on view in solo and group exhibitions across North America and Western Europe, and were favorites of the biennial circuit, included in those in Istanbul (1995), Venice (1995), Sydney (1996), and Johannesburg (1997), to much acclaim.

Upon completion of the series, however, Neshat would occasionally echo the complaints of some of her critics, describing the photographs as "didactic"³⁰¹ and "naïve"³⁰², as too overtly political and narrow in scope. As a result, she "abandoned paper for celluloid," shifting from photography first to video installation, and then later to feature film production, in the process "discover[ing] a much more sophisticated symbolic language."³⁰³ As Neshat describes it, "by 1997, while I remained totally interested in the social and political realities of my country, I felt the urge to move beyond the realm of politics."³⁰⁴ "[A]fter a few years," the artist relates, "I wanted to make work that was more lyrical, philosophical and poetic"³⁰⁵ — work that was "more quiet and less confrontational," aspiring to "universal" themes.³⁰⁶ "I'm an artist, not an activist," Neshat would argue.³⁰⁷

If the later works "touch on what one might call universal human nature" (a claim we should certainly challenge), the basic premise of this dissertation has been that *Women of Allah* remains insistently particular in its attempt to come to terms with the social consequences of Iran's revolution of 1978-79.³⁰⁸ While the series engages the historically contentious and imbalanced relationship between those abstract constructions referred to as "Islam" and "the West," it also attends more specifically to perceptions of Iran and Iranians in America during and in the aftermath of the fourteen-month long Iranian hostage crisis. At the same time, *Women of Allah* also offers an exploratory inquiry into relations among secular and Muslim Iranians in the divided, post-revolutionary context and under the contemporary clerical Islamic regime.

Whatever Neshat's own reservations about the series, and despite subsequent shifts in her artistic concerns — many of which themselves have been met with some of the artworld's highest accolades — the *Women of Allah* photographs still stand out as the

³⁰¹ See Danto, 63; Saltz, 113; and Goldberg, 66.

³⁰² See Neshat's interview with David Ross on the Charlie Rose show, PBS, June 9, 2006.

³⁰³ Minna Proctor, "New Style Sacred Allegory" in *Aperture 166* (Spring 2002), 73.

³⁰⁴ MacDonald, 327-330.

³⁰⁵ Danto, 63.

³⁰⁶ Bertucci, 87; and Danto, 60-67.

³⁰⁷ Horsburgh, 44-45.

³⁰⁸ Danto, 64.

artist's most widely recognized and oft-reproduced production.³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the series' achievement remains little understood and insufficiently theorized. Contrary to the claims of most reviewers, I believe these works address much more than the allegedly enduring predicament of women in Muslim societies. Whereas the prevailing myth of the inception of Neshat's artistic career — the myth discussed in Chapters One and Two — has sustained the understanding of her work as primarily “about” Muslim women, this dissertation claims that *Women of Allah* is instead concerned with imagining the possibility of ethical encounters and dialogues between the Western and Muslim worlds, and specifically between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. At the same time, in Chapter Three, this dissertation claims that *Women of Allah* also imagines the possibility of ethical encounters *within* Iran, between supporters of the Islamic Republic and Iran's previous secularist state. Considering the *Women of Allah* photographs beyond their most immediate and provocative visual content, in this dissertation I have asked how these works engaged the fallout of the Islamic Revolution, at once addressing contemporary confrontations between Americans and Iranians, and foregrounding an internal division within Iran between two regimes and their ideologies, in both of which women represented volatile issues.

Central to this inquiry has been the assertion that *Women of Allah* is fundamentally a project of citation and appropriation. Through their quotations of visual and verbal language, these works mirror the socio-political tensions and hostilities characterizing relations between Iran and America, as well as internal to Iran, in the last three decades. Most manifestly, Chapter Two proposes, *Women of Allah*'s citation of untranslated Iranian poetry divides viewers between those who can and cannot read the words written upon the photographs, highlighting the way in which we approach and engage these works — and the figures represented in them — with different frames of reference, histories, and forms of knowledge — ones that the photographs narrowly delimit as either “American” or “Iranian.” *Women of Allah* therefore invokes the belligerence and the perversely dysfunctional misfiring of communications characteristic of confrontations between Iran and America since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, as poetic citations, the words written upon *Women of Allah* also summon longstanding, if dynamic and ever-evolving, Iranian customary social practices privileging poetic quotation and recitation, prompting viewers who can read the poems to reinterpret their present circumstances in light of the wisdom of the past, expressed through poetry. Such an appeal, I argue in Chapter Three, is especially significant in light of the Islamic regime's attempts to eradicate visual signs reminiscent of the secularized era of the Pahlavi monarchy, as well as the monarchy's own preceding attempts to do the same with respect to Iran's Islamic vernacular culture.

Understanding the visual imagery depicted in *Women of Allah* in terms of appropriation enables us further to consider these works as commenting upon, rather than as merely reflecting, these contemporary embattled situations. In their close emulation of pervasive visual tropes and representations of Iran and Iranians in the American media of the 1980s, *Women of Allah* engages the ethos of fear and hostility advanced in that

³⁰⁹ To name just the most recent one, Neshat's first feature film, *Women without Men* (2009) — an adaptation of the eponymous novella by Iranian author Shahrnush Parsipur — was awarded the Silver Lion at the 2009 Venice Film Festival.

decade regarding Iran's (and, eventually, Islam's) homicidal, irrational otherness. Through sustained examination of the photographs' formal and visual properties, I have also underscored, however, the ways in which *Women of Allah* importantly revises its appropriations, invoking the viewer's embodied presence and therefore constructing ambiguous and hyper-charged scenarios in which represented figure and viewer face off. As a result, these works stress that the confrontation between and within the U.S. and Iran involves not merely the ideological conflicts of governments, but also the everyday perceptions of ordinary individuals. It is, I claim, up to the viewer to determine the parameters of the engagement, and whether the confrontation will ultimately be constructive or violently catastrophic.

One significant issue this dissertation has largely marginalized is that of Neshat's diasporic condition. While Chapter One narrated the story of Neshat's departure from Iran and relocation to the United States in the mid-1970s, this study has not delved deeply into questions of how Neshat's move and subsequent exile from Iran as a result of the Islamic Revolution have informed the production and reception of her art. While attending closely to the formal presence of the body in the *Women of Allah* photographs, I have not, for example, pursued the implications of the fact that the body represented is most often Neshat's own — instead referring to her, when in the photographs, simply as either “the figure” or “the woman.” This decision has not been motivated by a belief that Neshat's displacement is incidental to her creativity; to the contrary, I agree with the artist when she claims she could not have made the work that she has had she never left Iran.³¹⁰ Indeed, that *Women of Allah* most typically represents a single figure (and occasionally a pair of figures consisting of Neshat and her son or, in an isolated instance, two of Neshat's friends in the U.S.), portraying larger groups of figures exclusively in those works produced in Iran, speaks poignantly, I think, to the solitariness, alienation, and detachment of exile. Although Neshat's position as an Iranian woman living for over a decade (at the start of her series) in the U.S. enabled her work, I have bracketed such considerations here because its emphasis on the subject position of the artist is separate from my own interest in *Women of Allah*'s contingency on the viewer; and whereas serious and sustained studies foregrounding the relevance of Neshat's diasporic status to the interpretation of her work have already emerged, scholarly attention has yet to consider the significance of these images' dialogism — how these works function in “living dialogue” with various viewers across national, political, and religious, divides.³¹¹

In this dissertation's split approach to *Women of Allah*, I have taken my cue from Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of linguistic discourse and appropriation advanced in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and particularly from Bakhtin's notion that a speaker's discursive

³¹⁰ Anne Kirker, “The Politics of Spirituality” in *Photophile* 49 (1996): 43.

³¹¹ Bakhtin, 271. For an interesting analysis of Neshat's art in relation to issues of her diasporic status, see Hamid Naficy, “Parallel Worlds” in *Shirin Neshat* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000), 42-54. Further study could pursue the question of how *Women of Allah* functions within the diasporic economy; in other words, how these works engage and encounter viewers of the Iranian diaspora in the United States.

utterance is always oriented toward an “answering-word” — a rejoinder whose outlines are dependent on the approach of the listener (on her history, her frames of reference, her experience). Arguing that *Women of Allah* orients itself toward viewers it interpellates as either “American” or “Iranian” in distinct and particular ways, this dissertation proposes that the photographs divide viewers in terms of national-political identifications. At the same time, this preliminary distinction only serves to highlight the way in which viewers also approach the works with different frames of reference, perceptual skills, habits and sensory aptitudes — historically and culturally specific categories that shape viewers’ approaches, and ultimately inform their rejoinders, to the photographs.

In other words, rather than dissolve or synthesize issues of difference in order to offer a unified picture of *Women of Allah*’s meaning, Chapters Two and Three aimed to address the specificity of these categories, to give each their due. Certainly *Women of Allah*’s construction of its viewers as “Iranian” or “American” can be problematic; as a writer, I have found it difficult to (want to) uphold such rigidly exclusionary categories that evoke a discourse of racial purity or national superiority. The viewers summoned by these artworks — viewers ostensibly privy to the works’ intricate and complex visual and textual codes — *are* fictive and abstract. Particularly in the absence of a significant body of “indigenous” Iranian art criticism, I have had to construct such a set of responses to *Women of Allah*; though I hope that by attending closely to the historical circumstances and social techniques engaged and elicited by the works, the readings also seem plausible. This dissertation ultimately represents an effort at comprehending *Women of Allah* according to its own terms; nevertheless, I would insist that the series’ division of its viewers as either “Iranian” or “American” is not the same as demanding we understand these categories in rigidly essentialist terms. Instead, in proposing the coherence of these categories, *Women of Allah* at once takes up the distinction as it functions on the international stage, and asks us to acknowledge the force that our varied means of engaging the world commands.

What I hope ultimately emerges is a picture of *Women of Allah* as an attempt at mutual comprehension and dialogue across embattled divides. Although the moment addressed in *Women of Allah* was that of the 1980s and 1990s, these photographs’ assertions remain all too urgent today. Since the events of September 11, 2001, substantive social and geopolitical tensions between and within the Western and Muslim worlds have only escalated and as I write this conclusion, talk of an Israeli or American attack against Iran for its nuclear program are intensifying.³¹² Within this bellicose climate, *Women of Allah* might be understood to offer a picture of ethical coexistence within difference — a coexistence that is still fragile and tenuous, but nonetheless better than the alternative. That these photographs maintain, even uphold, difference — even if they do so in ways that may seem problematic — represents a step toward acknowledging, rather than effacing or annihilating, those whose values we might not share or fully comprehend. Ultimately, while Neshat’s artworks evoke contemporary conflicts — between Iran and the United States, between Islam and the West, and between secular and Muslim Iranians — they also gesture beyond this context and toward

³¹² See, for example, Scott Shane, “In Din over Iran, Rattling Sabers Echo,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2012, A1.

modes of encounter and dialogue that speak to the viability of ethical relations between these worlds.

Finally, in insisting throughout *Women of Allah* — both in its representational content, and through its poetic citations — that it is the women in the photographs who cultivate such understanding and engagement, these photographs refuse the role of Iranian or Muslim women as ideological constructs in a discourse that glosses over them. Instead, these photographs insist on their vitality, and the centrality of their speech, refusing to objectify and immobilize them on the photographic surface.

Neshat may have been right in calling *Women of Allah* didactic; but, it seems, we can only stand to benefit from its lessons.

Figures



Figure 1. Shirin Neshat. *I Am its Secret*. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Plauto.

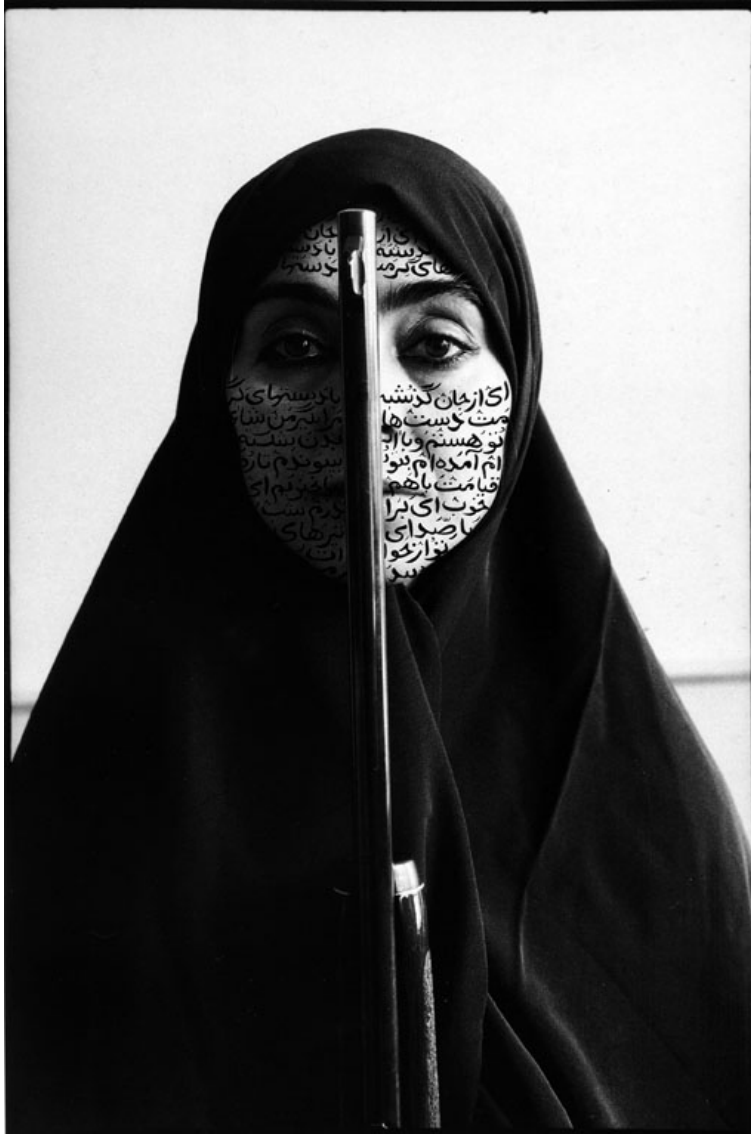


Figure 2. Shirin Neshat. *Rebellious Silence*. 1994. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 3. Jananne Al-Ani. *Untitled*. 1989.



Figure 4. Jean Gaumy. Photograph. Women taking part in a political demonstration in support of the war against Iraq. Tehran, Iran.

Copyright Jean Gaumy/Magnum photos.



Figure 5. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*. Installation image. Franklin Furnace Gallery, *Unveiling*. 1993.

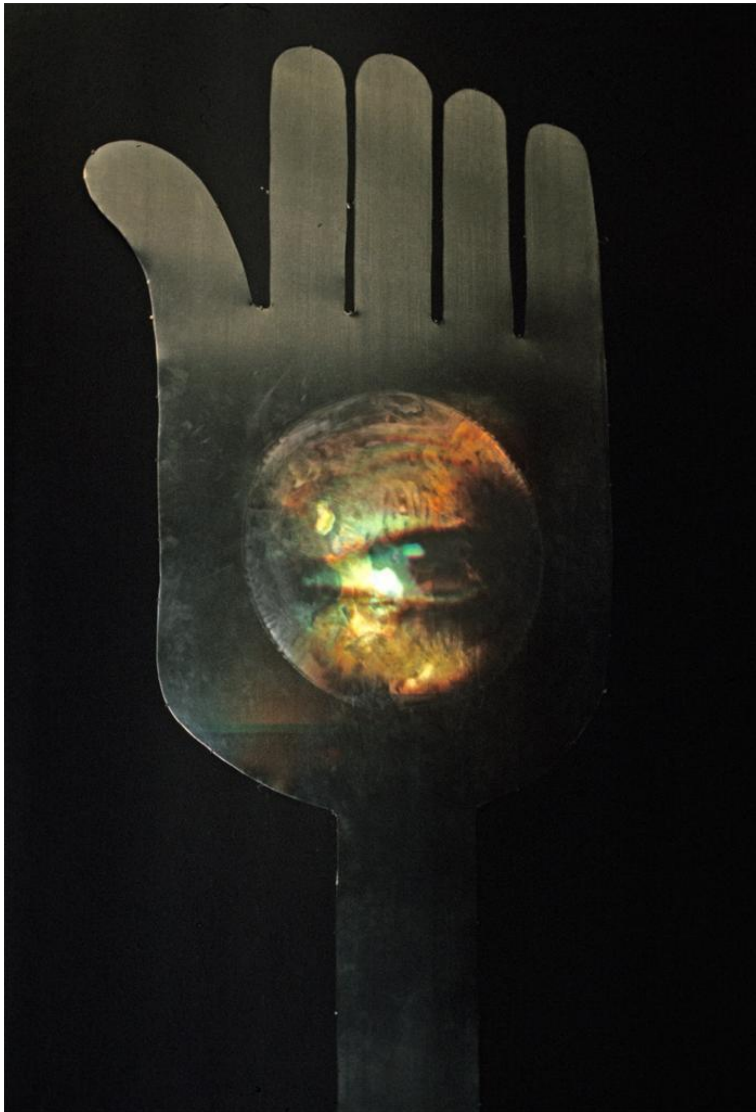


Figure 6. Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*. Franklin Furnace Gallery, Installation image. *Unveiling*. 1993.



Figure 7. Fred Wilson, *Metalwork* in *Mining the Museum*. Maryland Historical Society. 1992.



Figure 8. Mona Hatoum. *Present Tense*. 1996.



Figure 9. Carl Andre. *144 Magnesium Squares*. 1969.



Figure 10. Mona Hatoum. *Corps Étranger*. 1994. Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure.

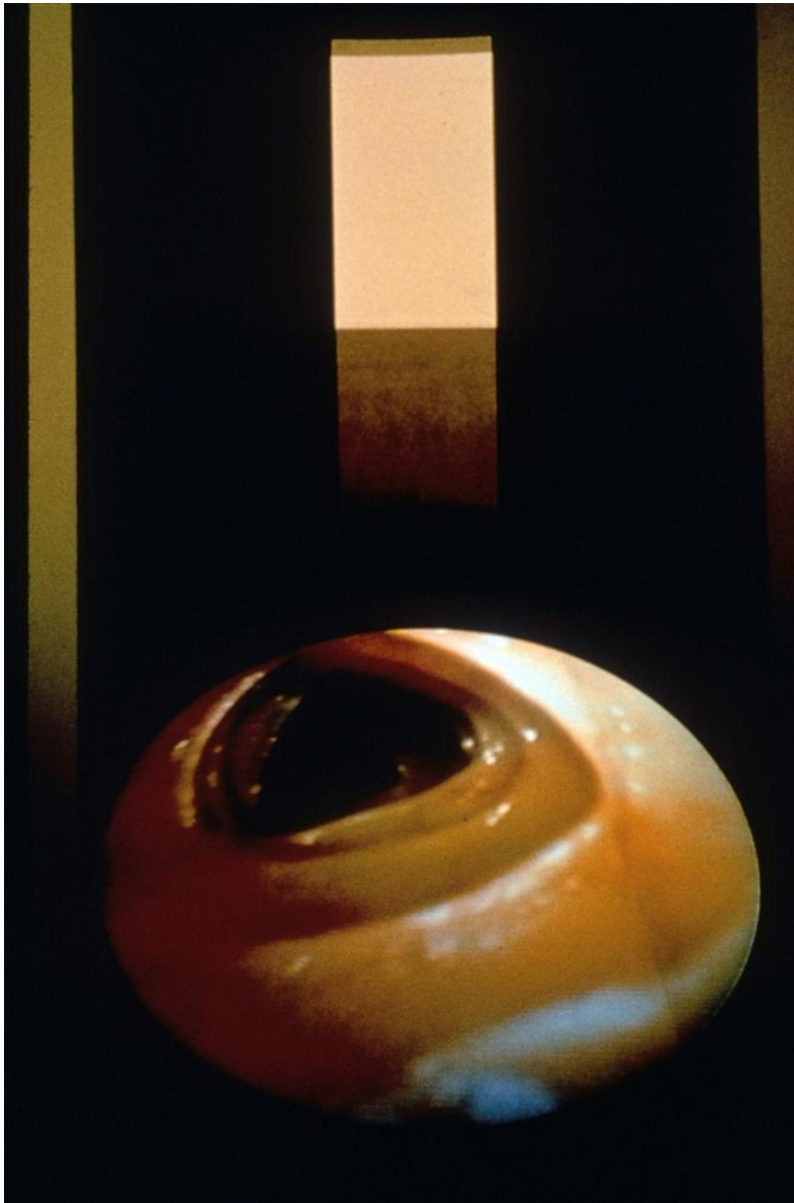


Figure 11. Mona Hatoum. *Corps Étranger*. 1994.



Figure 12. Robert Morris. *Untitled*, 1966. Fiberglass, light fixtures. 8 ft. x 2 ft.



Figure 13. Shirin Neshat. *Unveiling* exhibition, Franklin Furnace Gallery. 1993. Installation view.



Figure 14. Shirin Neshat. *Unveiling* exhibition, Franklin Furnace Gallery. 1993. Installation image.



Figure 15. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled* (subsequently titled “*Unveiling*”). *Unveiling*, Franklin Furnace Gallery, 1993.



Figure 16. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled* (subsequently titled *Offered Eyes*). c. 1992.

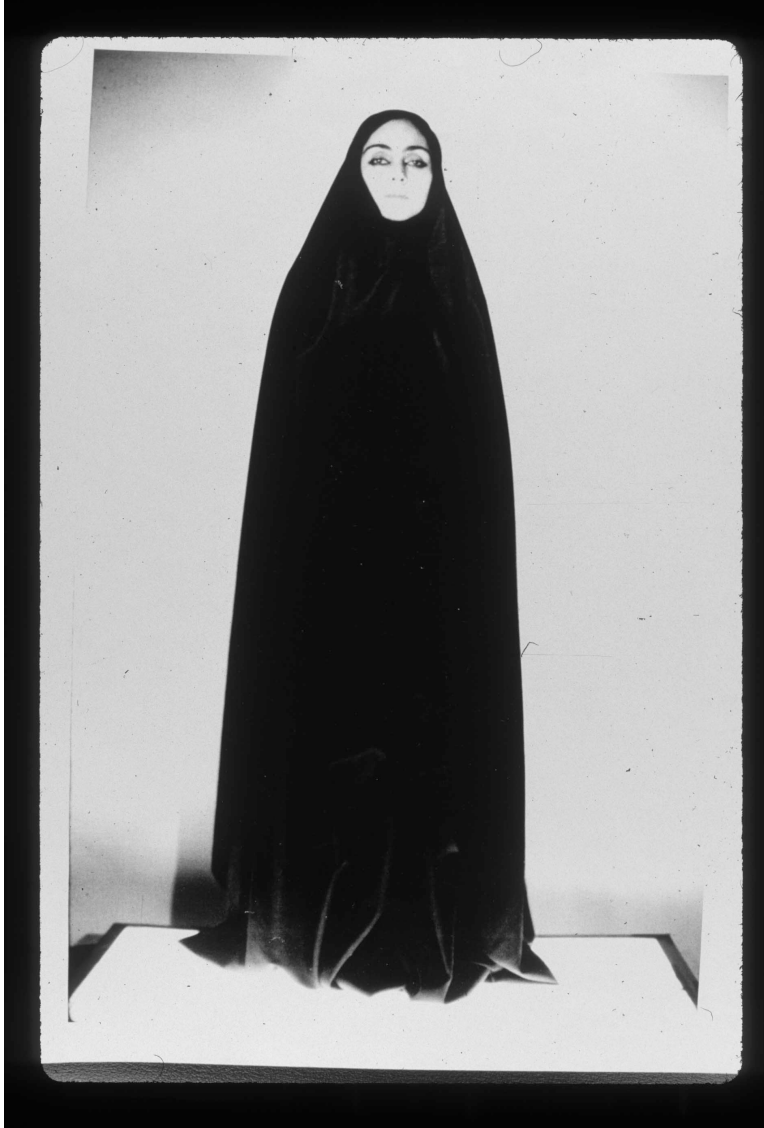


Figure 17. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*, in *Unveiling*, Franklin Furnace Gallery, 1993.



Figure 18. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*, in *Unveiling*, Franklin Furnace Gallery, 1993.

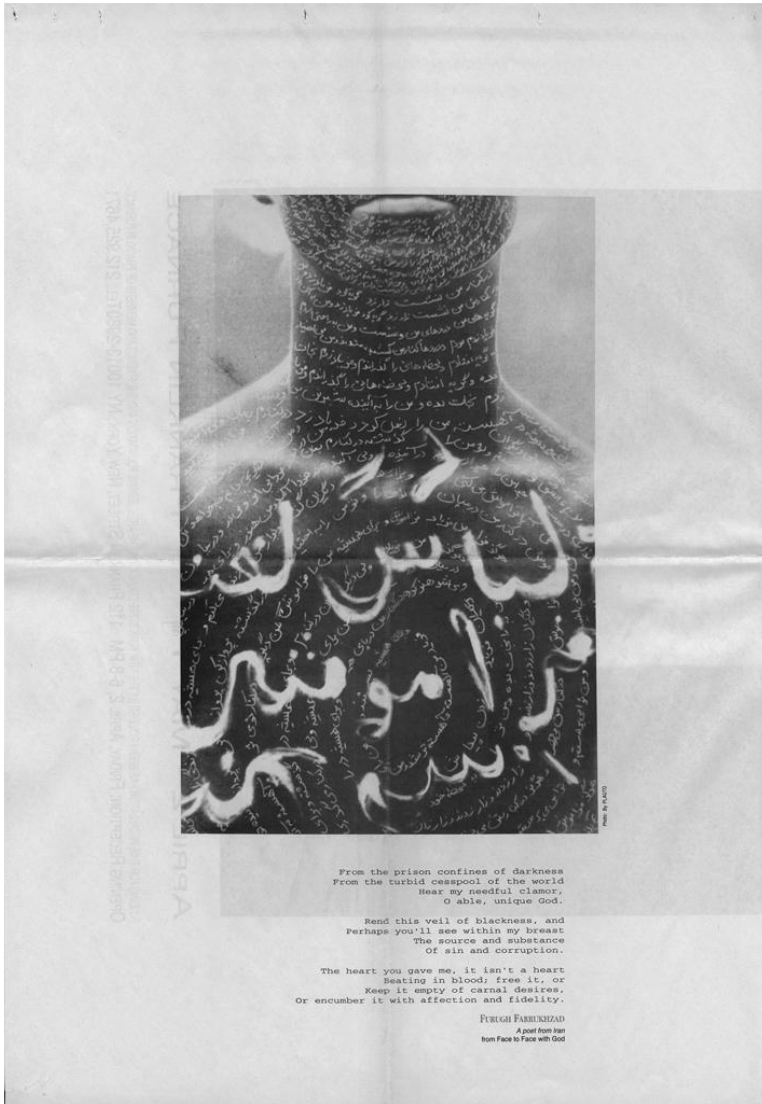


Figure 19. Shirin Neshat. Poster reproduction in negative of photograph in *Unveiling* (twelfth from the left in installation image) at Franklin Furnace Gallery, 1993.

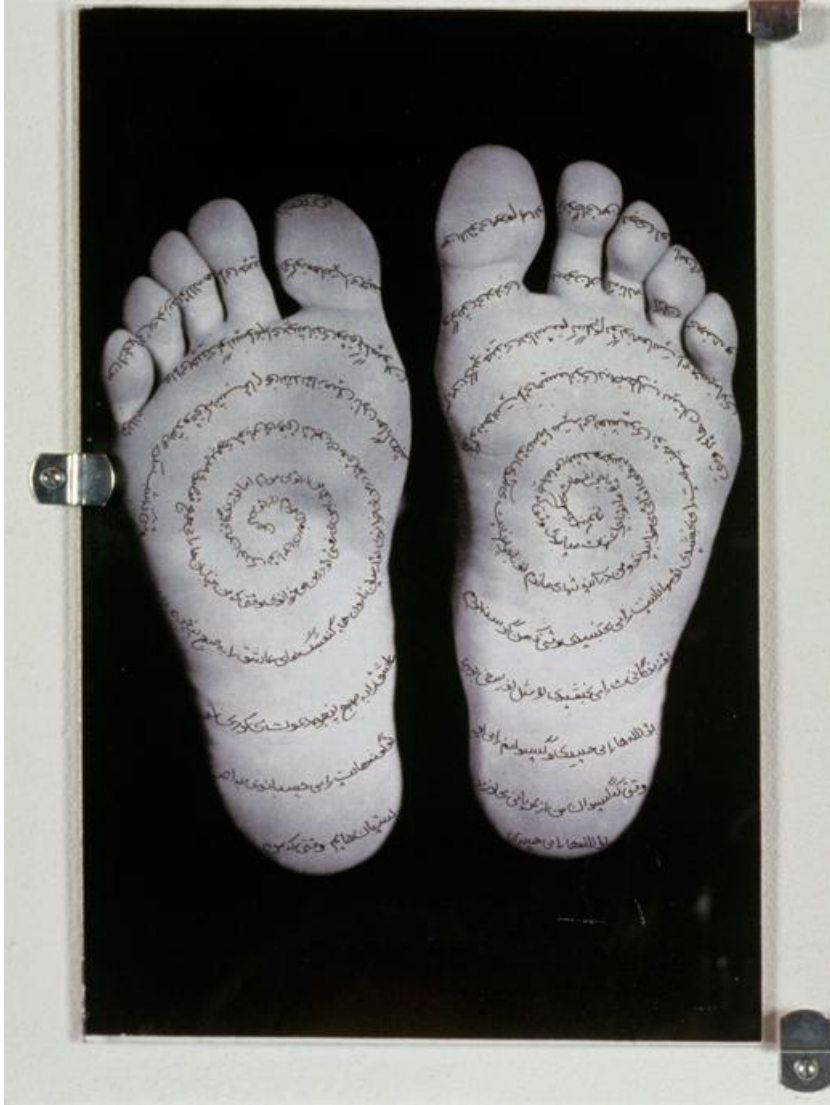


Figure 20. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*, in *Unveiling*, Franklin Furnace Gallery. 1993.



Figure 21. Shirin Neshat. *Offered Eyes*. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Plauto.



Figure 22. Shirin Neshat. "Unveiling." *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Plauto.



Figure 23. Installation view. *Fever* (December 14, 1992 – February 6, 1993) at Exit Art/The First World.



Figure 24. Shirin Neshat. Installation image. *Fever*, 1992-3.



Figure 25. Shirin Neshat. Installation image. *Fever*, 1992-3.

H O M E A PALESTINIAN QUEST L A N D

APRIL 30 - MAY 21, 1989

Opening Reception:
SUNDAY, APRIL 30, 5-8pm

- PANEL DISCUSSION AT 6:00pm with Palestinian representatives, Israeli artists and several local artists who recently toured the occupied territories and Israel, sponsored by the Alternative Museum.
- AT 5:30pm, excerpted 1/2 hour video documentation from this trip by Terry Berkowitz.



Peter Gourtain. "You Can't Buy My Spirit"

Homeland was inspired by two dynamically significant events of the past year - the intifada, the popular uprising on the occupied West Bank and Gaza, still as fervent as ever, and the overwhelming adoption of the declaration of independence of the State of Palestine by the Palestine National Council. These two interrelated developments represent distilled manifestations of the will and the resolve of the Palestinian people to resist 21 years of Israeli military occupation and to affirm concrete proposals and efforts to rebuild their society in peaceful co-existence with Israel.

Exhibitors of diverse origins and artistic sensibilities were invited to participate, not on the basis of their agreement with our particular perspectives or analysis of this Middle East crisis, but on their willingness to contribute a creative response to their serious consideration of the relevant issues and events.



"An Arab woman sewing a Palestinian flag outside her home in the occupied West Bank in preparation for the anniversary of the founding of Al Fatah, Yasir Arafat's group within the Palestine Liberation Organization."

Our motivation for organizing this exhibition and panel discussion is to enlarge the currently small but expanding circle of informed and concerned contributors to the necessary dialogue which can begin to break down the barriers of prejudice, fear and disinformation. Furthermore, we hope that exhibitors and viewers alike, will urge our government to clearly demonstrate its commitment to a genuine and internationally acceptable peace process in this region now.

We are indebted to all the exhibition and panel discussion participants for their generous contributions of time and effort. Our heartfelt thanks also extend to Mo Bahc, the steadfast founder and director of Minor Injury, and to Virginia Hoge, for her assistance in the production of this catalogue.

Yona Soon Min & Shirin Neshat
Exhibition Organizers

Figure 26. Page 1 (of 3), exhibition brochure, *Homeland: A Palestinian Quest* (April 30 - May 21, 1989). Exhibition curated by Shirin Neshat and Yong Soon Min.

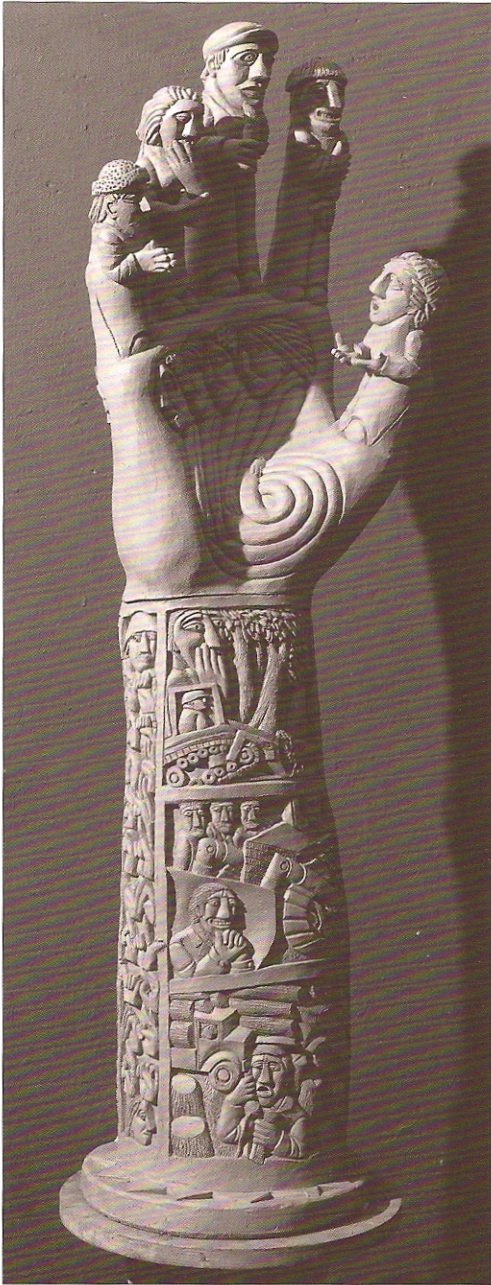


Figure 27. Peter Gourfain. *Untitled*. 1989. Terracotta. H. 46 Diam. 15 inches. Collection of Stephen and Pamela Hootkin.

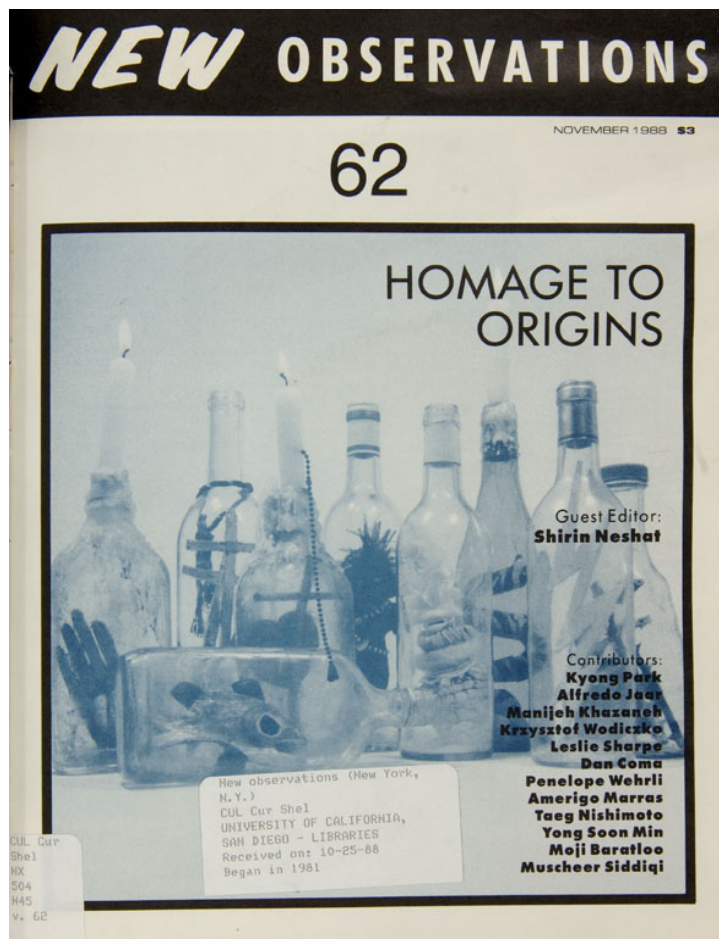


Figure 28. Shirin Neshat. Cover of *New Observations* 62, November 1988, "Homage to Origins," guest edited by the artist.

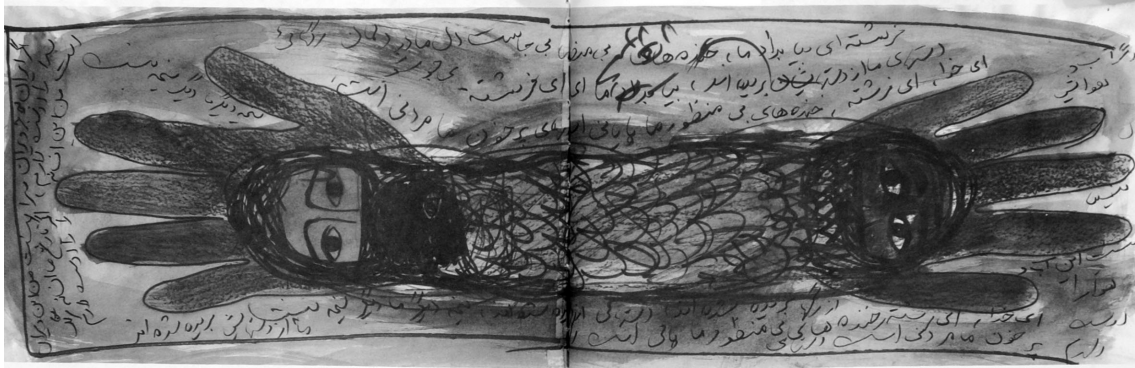


Figure 29. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled* [?]. Reproduction of a watercolor and ink drawing spanning pages 2-3 of *Homage to Origins, New Observations* 62, November 1988.

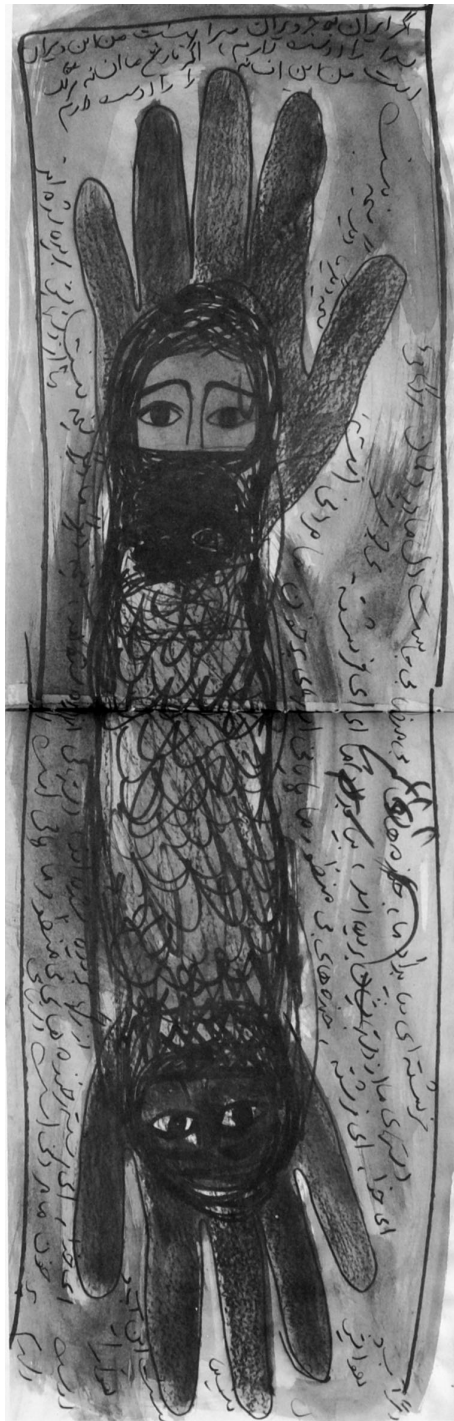


Figure 30. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled* [?]. Reproduction of a watercolor and ink drawing spanning pages 2-3 of *Homage to Origins, New Observations* 62, November 1988.



Figure 31. Shirin Neshat. *Faceless*. 1994. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Robert Wessler.



Figure 32. Shirin Neshat. *Guardians of Revolution*. 1994. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 33. Shirin Neshat. *Stories of Martyrdom (variation one)*. 1994. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 34. Shirin Neshat. *Seeking Martyrdom (variation two)*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.

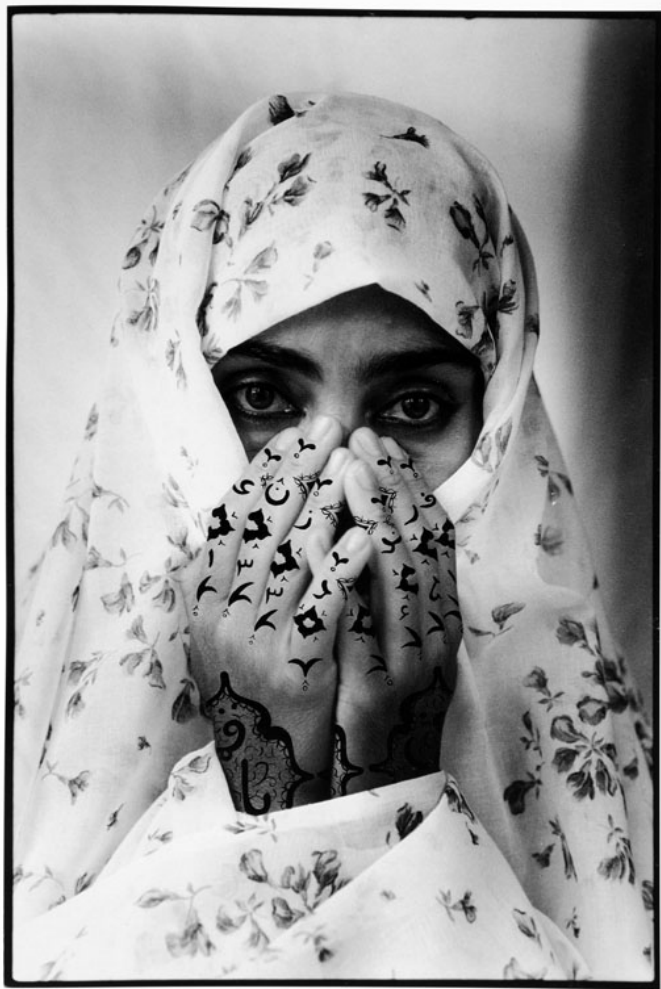


Figure 35. Shirin Neshat. *Identified*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 36. Shirin Neshat. *Face to Face with God*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.

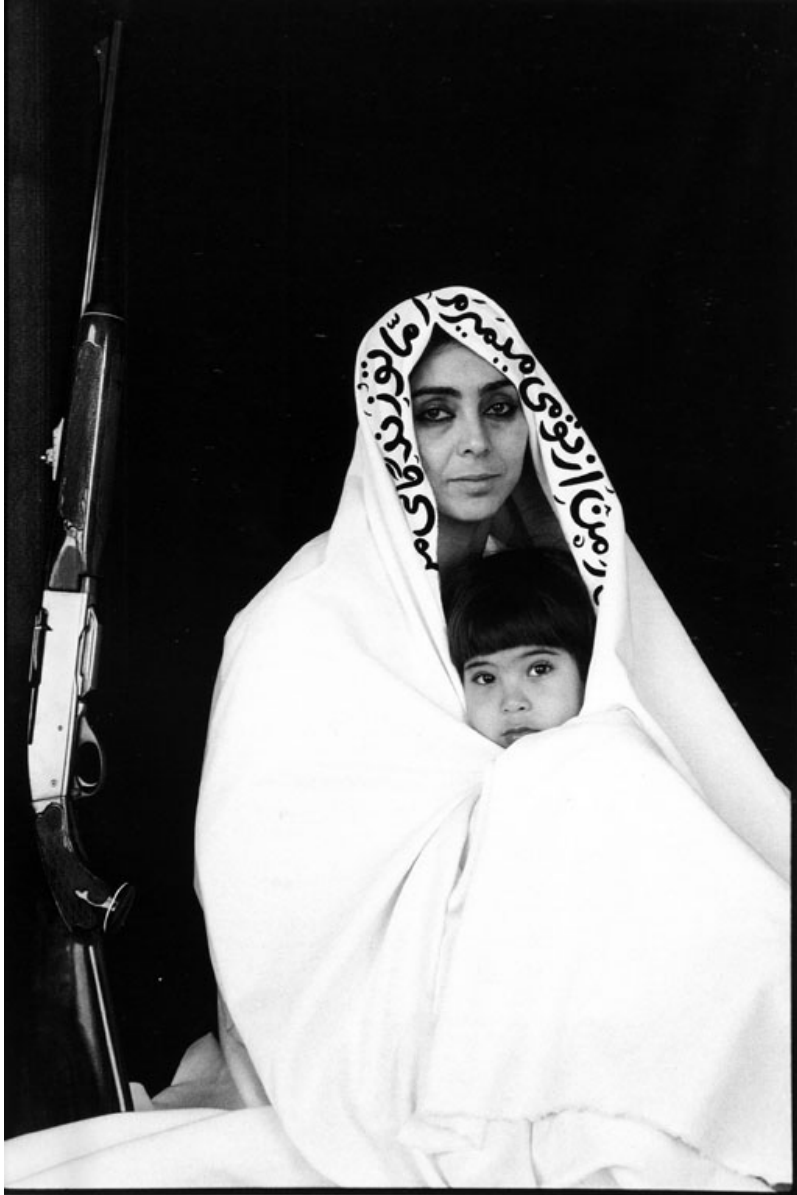


Figure 37. Shirin Neshat. *My Beloved*. 1995. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 38. Shirin Neshat. *Women of Allah*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print. Photograph taken by Bahman Jallili.



Figure 39. Shirin Neshat. *Women of Allah*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print. Photograph taken by Bahman Jallili.



Figure 40. Shirin Neshat. *Women of Allah*. 1995. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print. Photograph taken by Bahman Jallili.



Figure 41. Shirin Neshat. *Whispers*. 1997. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Larry Barns.



Figure 42. Shirin Neshat. *Him*. 1997. *Women of Allah* series. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Larry Barns.



Figure 43. Shirin Neshat. *Speechless*. 1996. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Larry Barns.



Figure 44. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*. 1996. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Larry Barns.



Figure 45. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still 14*. 1978. Photograph. 10 x 8 inches.



Figure 46. Sherrie Levine. *After Walker Evans 3*. 1981. Photograph. 25.4 x 20.3 cm.



Figure 47. Eugène Delacroix. *The Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. 1834. Oil on canvas. 180 x 229 cm. Musée du Louvre.



Figure 48. "Arab women."
Postcard, c. 1900-1930, reproduced in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 76.



Figure 49. "Scenes and types. Arabian woman with the Yachmak."
Postcard, c. 1900-1930, reproduced in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 126.



Figure 50. "Women training at a camp northeast of Tehran." In "Living with War and Revolution." *Time*, August 17, 1987. Photograph by Jean Gaumy/Magnum.

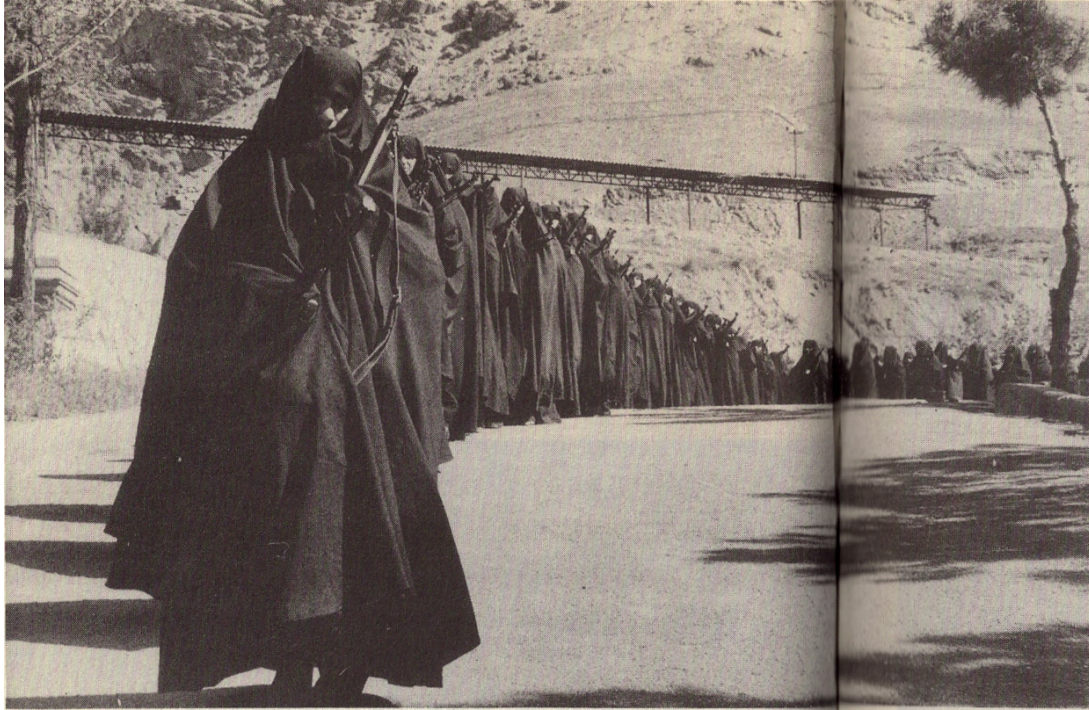


Figure 51. “Women, wearing the chador, marching around one of the military camps for Iranian women, June 1986. They are armed with semi-automatics (Photo by Sipa Press).” From Minou Reeves, *Female Warriors of Allah: Women and the Islamic Revolution*, 112.



Figure 52. “A chador-clad volunteer prepares to fire a handgun during training (© Associated Press).” From Minou Reeves, *Female Warriors of Allah: Women and the Islamic Revolution*, 110.



Figure 53. Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*. 1994. Gelatin silver print. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.



Figure 54. John Maclean, "America under the gun," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1979.

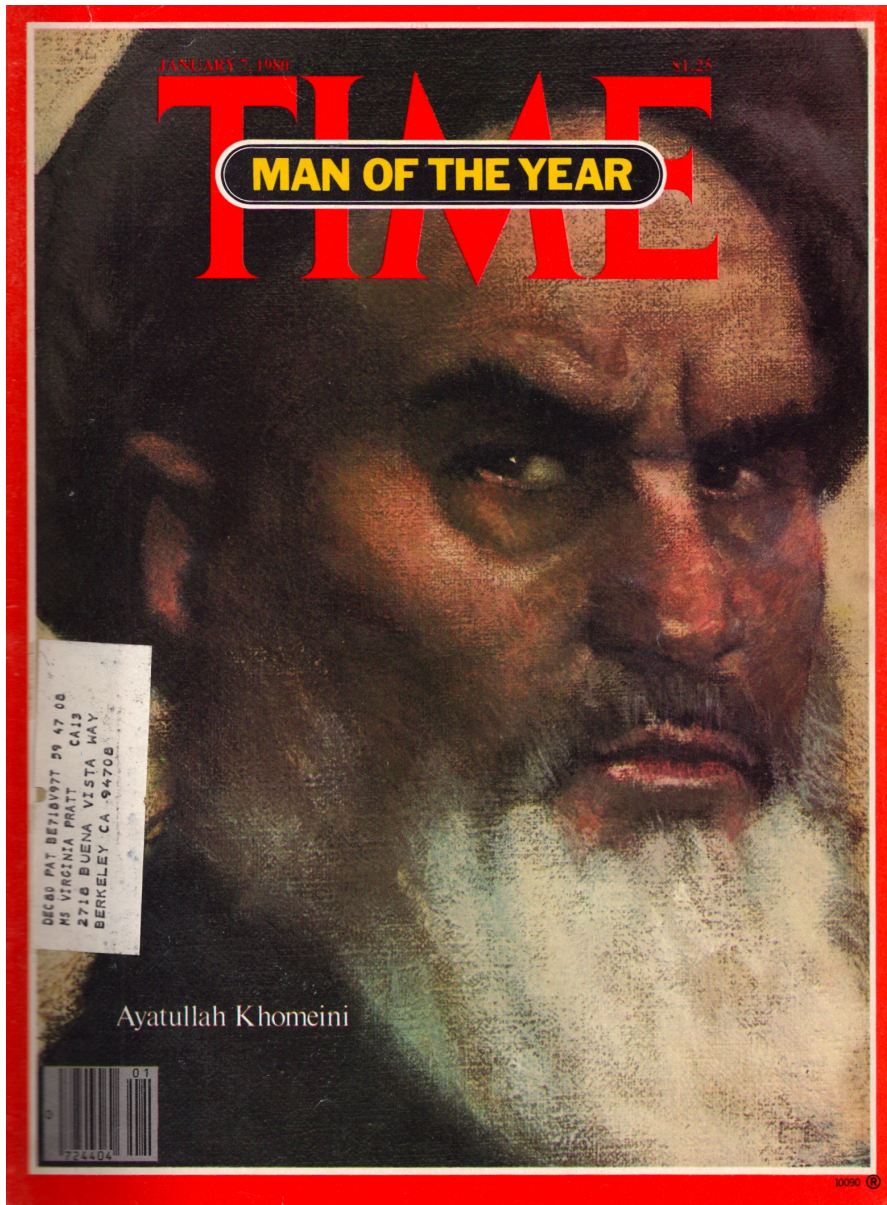


Figure 55. *Time* (Man of the Year issue, cover). January 7, 1980.

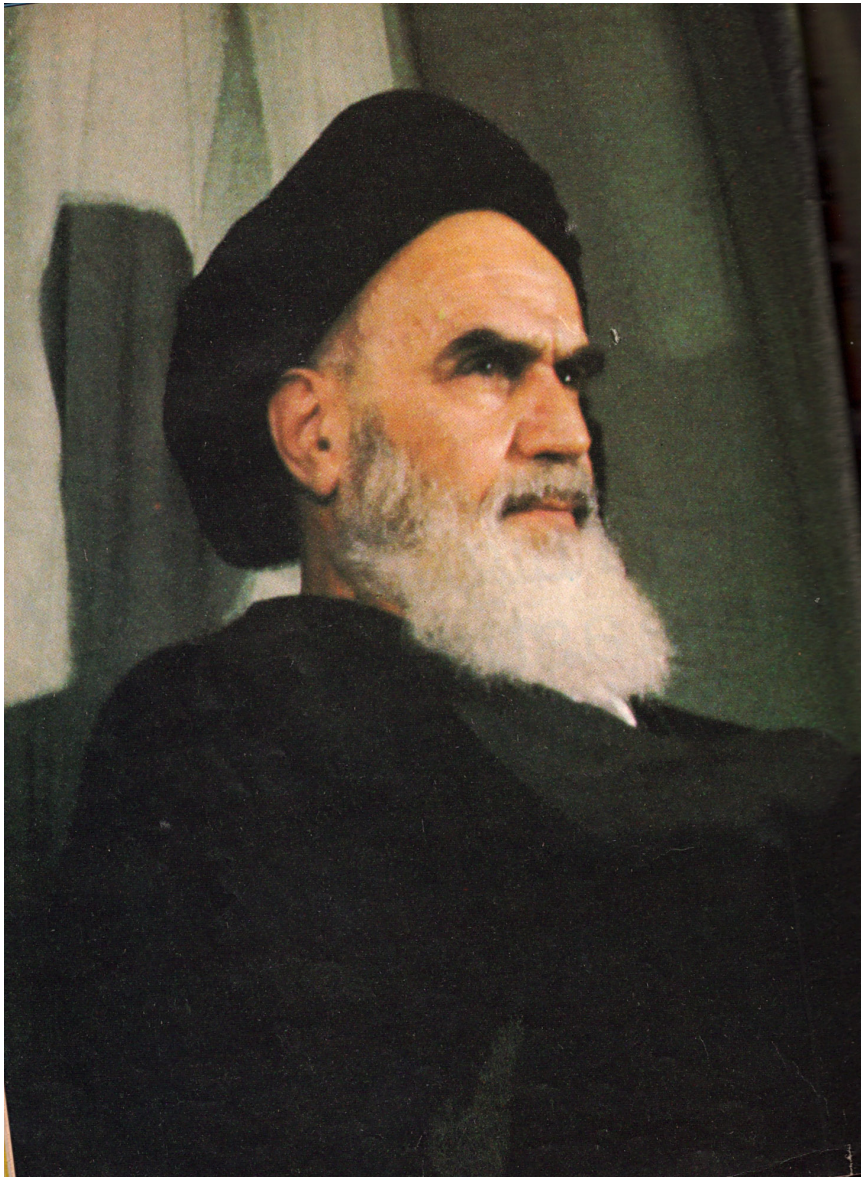
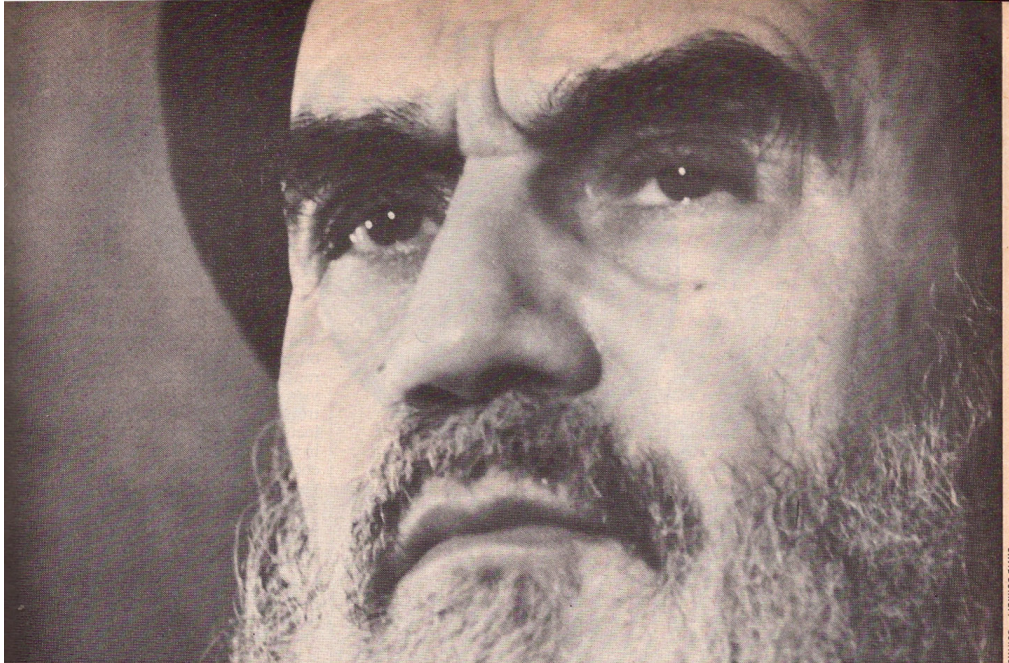


Figure 56. Photograph accompanying “The Mystic who Lit the Fires of Hatred,” *Time*, January 7, 1980 (Man of the Year issue), 8.



The resolute look of Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini, the spiritual and political leader of the revolution in Iran

Figure 57. Photograph of Khomeini accompanying the article, “Iran: On the Brink of Civil War,” *Time*, February 19, 1979, page 31.

The caption reads: “The resolute look of Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini, the spiritual and political leader of the revolution in Iran.”



Figure 58. *Time* (cover), February 12, 1979.

Seeing Green

The Red Menace Is Gone. But Here's Islam.

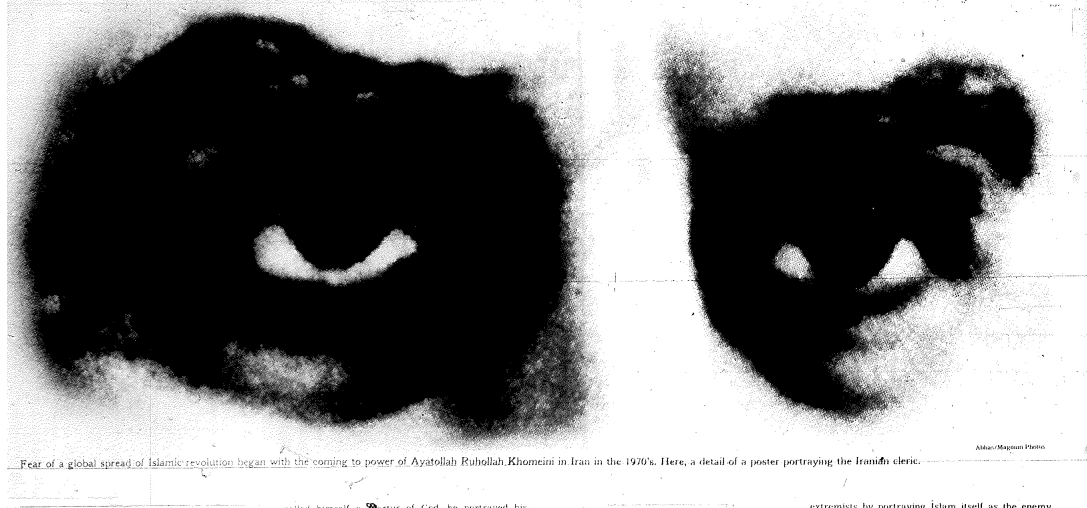


Figure 59. Photograph accompanying, Elaine Sciolino, "The Red Menace is Gone. But Here's Islam," *The New York Times*, January 26, 1996, Section 4. (Photograph by Abbas/Magnum Photos.)

The caption reads: "Fear of a global spread of Islamic Revolution began with the coming to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran in the 1970's. Here a detail of a poster portraying the Iranian cleric."



Figure 60. Cover of *Life*. January 1980.



Figure 61. Vito Acconci. *Centers*. 1971. Video (22 minutes).



Figure 62. Niki de Saint Phalle. Photograph of the artist in action, creating a *Shooting* painting. Circa 1961.



Figure 63. Valie Export. *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. Photograph. 1969.



Figure 64. Martha Rosler. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. 1975. Film (6.09 minutes).

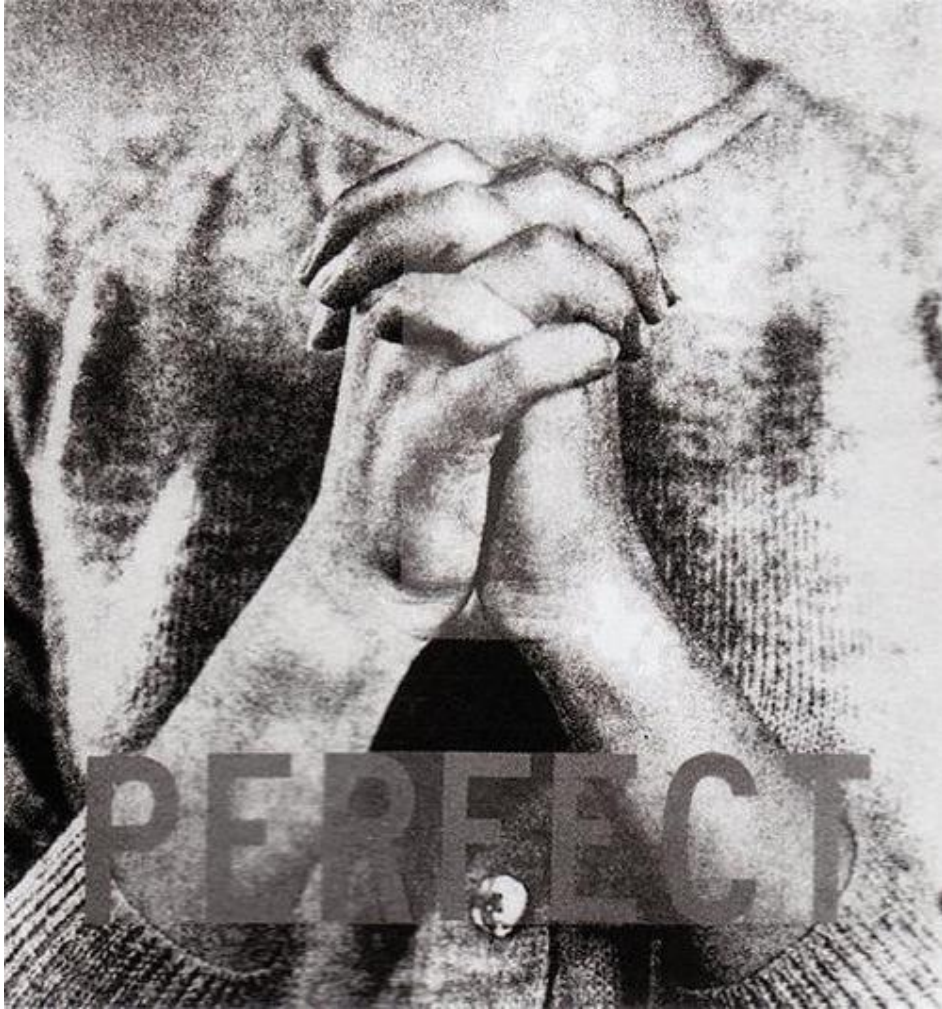


Figure 65. Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Perfect)*. 1980.

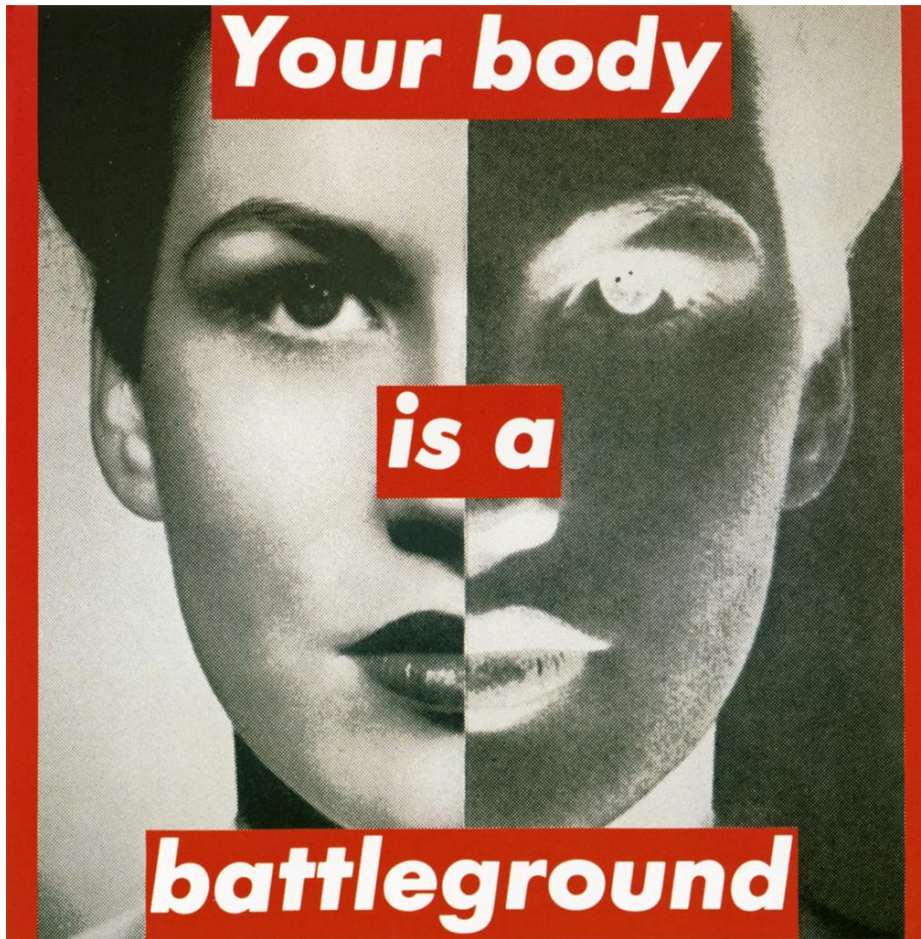


Figure 66. Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*. 1989. Photographic screenprint on vinyl. 112 x 112 inches.

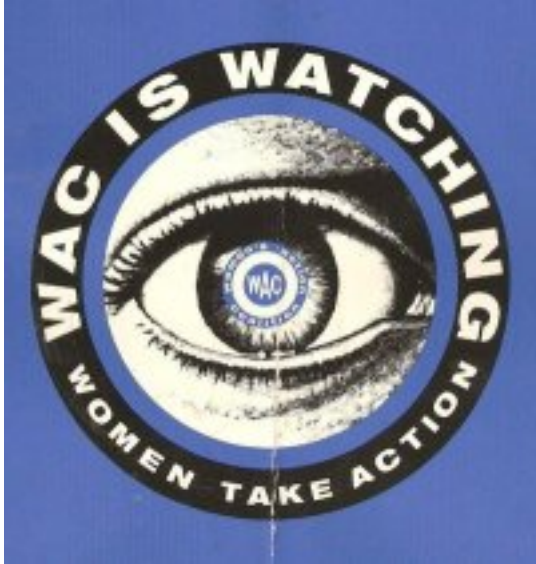


Figure 67. Women's Action Coalition. *WAC is Watching*. Graphic. Circa 1992.



Figure 68. Lalla Essaydi. #22b. 2005. *Les Femmes du Maroc* series. Chromogenic print on aluminum. 48 x 60 inches.



Figure 69. Lalla Essaydi. #17. 2005. *Les Femmes du Maroc* series. Chromogenic print on aluminum. 48 x 60 inches.

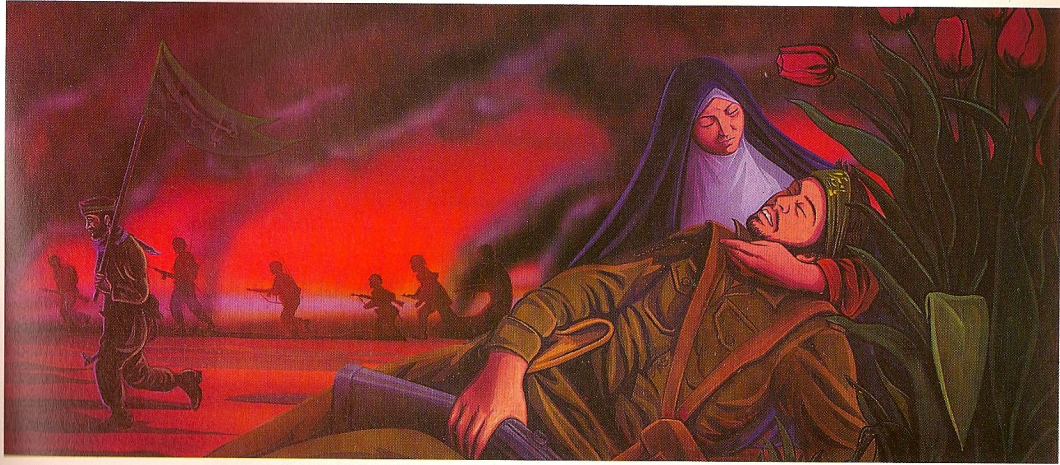


Figure 70. Mohammad Khazai. *Sacred Defense*. c. 1985. From *A Decade with the Graphists of the Islamic Revolution 1979-1989* (42).



Figure 71. Kazem Chalipa. *Neghabane Noor*. c. 1985. Poster. From *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* (100).



Figure 72. Mostafa Goodarzi. *The Heirs of Zeinab*. c. 1985. From *A Decade with the Graphists of the Islamic Revolution 1979-1989* (144).

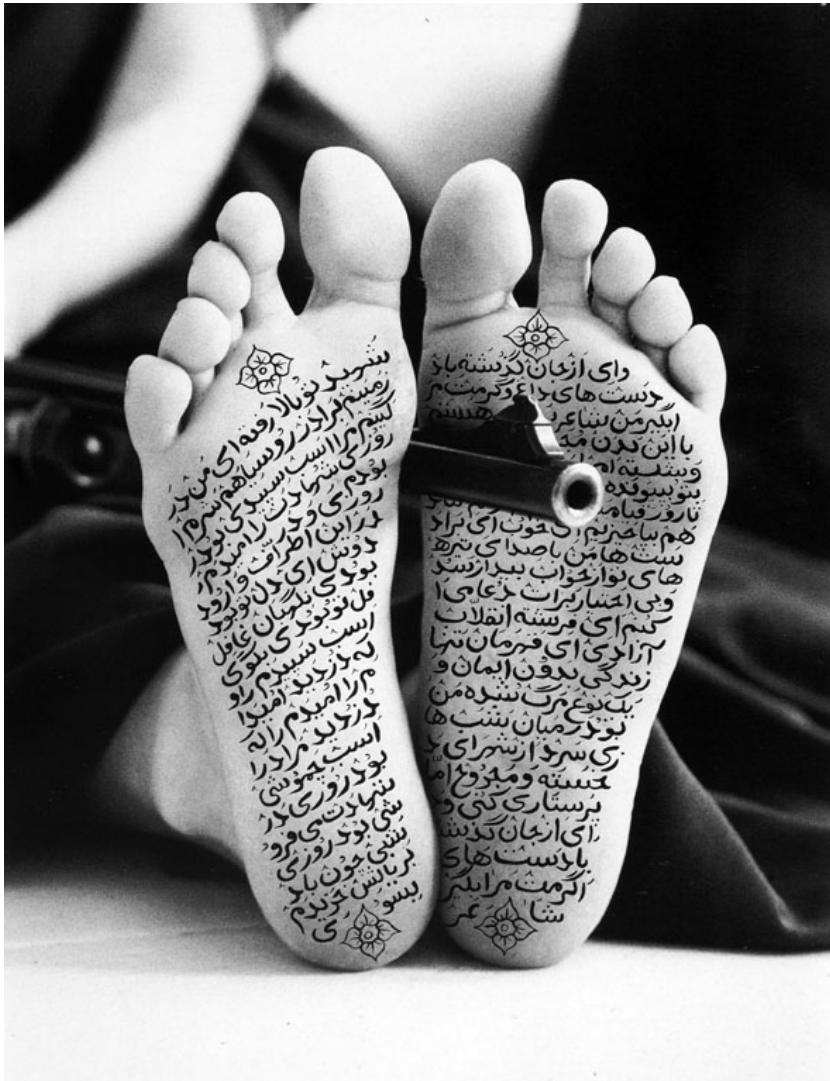


Figure 73. Shirin Neshat. *Allegiance with Wakefulness*. 1994. Gelatin silver print & ink. Photograph taken by Cynthia Preston.

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