

Shirin Neshat, *Zarin*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum for Contemporary Art, Berlin, October 1-December 4, 2005

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Shirin Neshat*Zarin*

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Through poetry/art humans have survived. – Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat's chromatic single-channel projection *Zarin* (2005) had its premiere in Berlin. This 35 mm film, transferred to DVD, does not catapult viewers onto the seashore and into musical expanse – as does *Passage* – or into gendered spaces – as do *Rapture* and *Turbulent*. *Zarin* is mesmerizing for the suffering that is exposed on screen in over-life-size proportions. For the first time, Neshat's art makes for painful watching as we enter the private sphere and psychic interior of the once-child prostitute Zarin.¹ We witness sexual commerce less through explicit action and more through its effects, such as the empty face on which the camera rests. For the first time, also, we are situated in a space of narration, in which visual sequences are supplemented by subtitles, in English, printed on sheets of paper. The text allows us to read the madam's shouted monologue. Pain and female containment are played out over many frames, but freedom occurs at the end of the film, for Zarin turns momentarily mad, and free. She cleanses herself, through "madness," of male and institutional powers and of fear, to regain fullness of subjectivity. Hers is transcendence into *being*, into a different ontological state, which is not the result of realization *by* the body, as Gilles Deleuze would argue. Rather, something is realized *in* the body, through which the body itself becomes substantially different, breaking through, as it does in this work. When asked, "Have women reason to become insane in Iran?" Neshat responded, "I do not regard madness as negative. Women/artists are easily declared crazy or borderline when they speak. That is how you discredit women."²

Aspects of woundability are foregrounded and made palpable in *Zarin*, smoothed over by a visual language that emphasizes an Islamic societal set-up through aesthetic selection. The artist builds on the poetic Persian/Islamic tradition, traces of which are found in the visual lushness and unique camera angles. In the opening shots of the ten-minute projection, we are in Zarin's chamber on the upper floor of the establishment, and we look down onto the lower floor, where the madam and waiting customers sit. Both the camera and the newly introduced subtitles emphasize the two levels of habitat, which on a theoretical level reflect a monad with two units of space in which the lower floor is bright, the upper dark. Here, this has political implications, for the upper level must eventually negotiate with the lower, just as the enslaved woman must be freed from bondage. "Move it, Zarin," the madam shouts, "you have another customer." In the sparsely furnished room, one client places a coin on the table and leaves. "Did he pay yet?" the voice asks from below. Soon, another one enters. The room's main furniture is *her* body on which gendered divisions break down; the female body is territorialized and turned into possession. But only until the moment when, in bouts of hallucination, the customer's face turns into a haunting mask – indicating his loss of humanity. Arrested by the vision, Zarin is unable to "work." After calling repeatedly, the madam enters the chamber and shouts, "Making me climb all those stairs in this heat. You are driving me crazy . . . Get up, pull yourself together, your customer is waiting." Driven by an inner force, Zarin runs down the stairs and out of the establishment, never to return. We follow her through the town, seeing, as she sees, the dehumanized faces of a group of men, who in prostration respond to the imam's call to prayer. Soon, she enters the public bathhouse, where women wash each other while children linger in a steam-filled atmo-



sphere. For a moment we find relief, but then she starts scrubbing her anorexic body to the point of bleeding. It's a bloody cleansing! Finally, Zarin walks out and toward a shrine where she mumbles her prayers.

Why would the artist resort to such extreme language? *Zarin* could be read as a feminist text relating to essentialism, prostitution, and teenage anorexia. Issues of woman reduced to her essence – to a body whose purpose is to be subordinate, give pleasure, and reproduce – have been dealt with by feminists for years. Neshat is too passionate about her subject, women in Iranian society, to revisit this topic alone. Hers, I suggest, is a political allegory made so complex that it both reveals and conceals the target of her attack: fundamentalist phallogocentric narration/governance. As an Iranian living abroad, who, she insists, is "well informed about Iran," she has a unique point of view, which she can forcefully articulate. She critiques a regime of extremes while also endorsing endearing aspects of Islamic societies such as the female community in the bathhouse. Concurrently she reminds Western viewers that the principles and ethical guidelines that Islam shares with other world religions are not followed by fundamentalist hardliners full of hate and intolerance.

Focusing on the female body with such intensity exposes the very dark spots of a society run by extremists. Their restoration of a religious meta-narrative after the Islamic Revolution supposedly to give individuals guidance – which had been "lost" as a result of secularization under the influence of the West – is declared a failure through the suffering that is exposed. To turn against the West and isolate a country in the age of information technology is a dangerous gamble. "The sexual life is extreme in Iran," Neshat explains. "People suffocate and have become decadent. Afghanistan delivers cheap heroin, and AIDS is spreading rapidly." To expose this failure on the body of women is an affront to those who want to keep women controlled as an antidote to the "freedom" of the West. The sexual exploitation emphasized in *Zarin* has hate as its agent. In *Le Discours de la haine* (2005), André Glucksmann writes that the hate of the West mobilized by fundamental Islamic regimes has three prongs: anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, and, most of all, anti-women. The female body's inherent glamour is likened to the "false" glamour of the West and associated with the promise of luck, lust, and freedom, which must be suppressed at any cost. That, he argues, is why women have to be made invisible and contained. This leads to bodily exploitation and self-hate, which Neshat exposes through an art that attacks a narrative of extremes but ultimately demands a social representation of the female whose voice has been silenced, her very being violated and stolen by the patriarchy.

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1. *Zarin* is part of a video series in progress titled *Women without Men* based on Sharmush Parsipur's book.

2. Quotes by Neshat are from her Berlin interview printed in *Der Tagesspiegel*, 23 Oct. 2005, p. S1. Thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy and Nicolas Roffet.

Maria Zimmermann Brendel, who holds a Ph.D from McGill University, works as an art critic in Berlin.