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# FT Weekend Magazine

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**DARING**

**TO**

**DANCE**

**IN**

**IRAN**

Artist Anahita Razmi secretly filmed rooftop dancers in Tehran for a startling new work to be unveiled at next week's Frieze Art Fair



# DARING TO DANCE

High above Tehran, 12 rooftop dancers create a rare expression of freedom in modern Iran. Artist Anaita Razmi's video installation, to be shown at London's Frieze ArtFair next week, is poetic, powerful and political. By Liz Jobey Photography by Newsha Tavakolian



Dancers are photographed as they perform "Roof Piece Tehran" on rooftops in the north of the city. Contemporary dance is banned in Iran ▶

If you go to YouTube and enter “Tehran 2009” into the search engine, you very quickly come to “Roofs of Tehran”, a sequence of blurred and rather beautiful colour photographs of Iran’s capital city at night, edited together and set to a soundtrack of blaring car horns and general street noise mixed with human voices shouting into the night: “Allahu Akbar!” – Allah is great – and “Marg bar dictator!” – Death to the dictator. Over the background noise, a woman can be heard speaking quietly in Farsi. A translation is given below the frame:

Tomorrow is Saturday. Tomorrow is a day of destiny. Tonight, the cries of Allah-o Akbar are heard louder and louder than the nights before. Where is this place? Where is this place where every door is closed? ... Where is this place where so many innocent people are entrapped? Where is this place where no one comes to our aid? ... Where is this place that the young shed blood and then people go and pray – standing on that same blood and pray. ... Where is this place? You want me to tell you? This place is Iran. The homeland of you and me. This place is Iran.

“Tomorrow” would be June 13 2009, the day when the results of the disputed presidential elections were announced in Iran and the conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad would be reinstated for a second term. In the protests that followed, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to be met by violent attacks by riot police and Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Some died there – such as Neda Agha-Soltan, the young music student shot by pro-government forces, whose death, caught on video and played thousands of times on social networking sites, became a symbol of the post-election crackdown. Many others, including hundreds of women activists, were arrested, imprisoned, beaten, tortured and, in the case of the women, raped. Many of them are still held as political prisoners as the government tries to prevent

support for the opposition Green Movement spreading throughout the country.

Even Pietro Masturzo, the young Italian photographer who took the rooftop pictures, had been arrested and detained by police for three days, and was released just before the elections began. In another YouTube clip he describes how he spent several nights in a row trying to capture the night-time protests, and how one picture – of a woman on her roof, her hands covering her face, crying out to the heavens – later became the 2009 World Press Photo of the Year.

“Roofs of Tehran” is one of hundreds of similar videos, just a tiny slice of the viral movement that spread the protests in Iran across the rest of the world. And although she wasn’t in Tehran during the 2009 elections, the rooftop protests sowed a seed in the mind of the artist Anahita Razmi for a piece of work that is about to come to fruition during next week’s Frieze Art Fair in London, where her “Roof Piece Tehran” will be shown for the first time.

Last week, Razmi – her father is Iranian, her mother German – was working in a small studio at the Gasworks arts space in south London. Her three-month residency there comes as part of the Emdash Award, a new prize given jointly by the Emdash Foundation, a private arts foundation that supports emerging artists, and Frieze Projects, the commissioning arm of the Frieze Foundation. It is open to artists working outside the UK, who are under 35, or fewer than five years beyond graduation. Alongside the residency, it gives the winner funding (up to £10,000 production costs) to complete a new work, outside a gallery environment, which will be exhibited as part of the Frieze Art Fair. In Razmi’s case, this will involve 12 separate screens located at different points throughout the fair, a layout that replicates the architecture of the work itself, which was performed by 12 dancers improvising movements in sequence across 12 rooftops in Tehran.

Razmi’s proposal to the selection committee had been a simple one, though it would be anything but simple to carry out. She wanted to re-stage the seminal “Roof Piece”, first performed in New York 40 years ago, by the American dancer and choreographer Trisha Brown and 11 other dancers, across the rooftops of the area south of Houston Street, later to be universally known as SoHo.

Brown was a central figure in the community of downtown artists in the 1970s and her works were performed in lofts, before an audience of friends and fellow artists, or out in the streets, where she used the architecture in performances such as “Man Walking Down the Side of a Building”, in which her husband, Joseph Schlichter, wearing a harness that was invisible from below, walked down the side of their seven-storey building in Wooster Street. Brown described this work as, “A natural activity under the stress of an unnatural setting,” a definition that would certainly apply to the transposition of Brown’s performance to the rooftops of Tehran.

When we met, Razmi was sitting with two computers working on the final edit. The studio, which has very little natural light, would have been a handicap for a painter; for Razmi, it is probably a bonus. She speaks English fast and fluently. “Definitely this is a political piece,” she said. “I mean, the actual movements themselves are not political, they are just movements on the roof, but since the protests in 2009, the rooftops have become politicised spaces. They have always been domestic spaces.

“In New York in the 1970s there was this sense of a community, this mix of visual art and architecture, this close relationship between the audience and the performers. In Iran there are no dance performances. For artists there are rules and every exhibition has to go through these rules. So in the re-enactment of this performance, there were lots of differences in the concept that I had.”

Appropriating other artists’ ideas is something that Razmi has done before, with works by Tracey Emin, by Sophie Calle, and even by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who famously wrapped the Pont Neuf in Paris in 1985 and the Reichstag in Berlin, 10 years later. (In 2009 Razmi wrote to the Iranian ministry of culture with a proposal to wrap the Azadi Tower, Tehran’s most famous monument; she received no reply). She is, though, interested in pieces she can reinterpret and recontextualise, rather than simply “quote” in a postmodern way.

“I would never repeat something just for the beauty of repetition. Definitely not. But this roof piece is a real re-enactment. It is taking the same parameters of Trisha Brown’s performance: 12 dancers, all dressed in red; the movement is going from dancer number one to dancer number 12 in one direction and then from dancer number 12 to dancer number one. So we’re taking the same set-up but just by changing the location, by going from New York in the 1970s to contemporary Tehran, and then to London to this art fair, in every step the piece automatically gains different associations, different values. I am not changing anything, but still it changes. At some point, if you have two images in your head and you connect them, then something comes out that you didn’t anticipate.”

Sarah McCrory, the curator of Frieze Projects, was on the selection committee for the Emdash Award. “There were two interesting points about [Razmi’s] proposal. It was a political work ▶



Left and below: Protests following the Iranian elections in June 2009. Opposite page: Anahita Razmi, photographed in London



“We are not shouting... We are relating to political issues, but in a very poetic way”

Anahita Razmi

Portrait: Rick Pushinsky



This is not the first work of Razmi's to make reference to the situation in Iran. She went there for the first time in 2005 when she was 24. She doesn't speak the language, nor was she raised in any particular religion, but when she was growing up it was always there in the background. Her father left after the revolution in 1979. "I have this special connection to the country because in my whole childhood we never [went] there, particularly because of the political situation. So there was just a strange link to this country that you couldn't even go to."

When she did go there, she went as a tourist, and made sure she stuck to the rules. "You have to dress properly, wear a headscarf, not show any cleavage, not show your legs. No, I don't stand out."

This seems unlikely. She is strikingly good looking; six feet tall, slender, dressed all in black – ankle boots, mini-skirt, leggings, leather jacket – with her long black hair cut into a thick fringe and hanging loose down her back. I find myself imagining how she would look in a *chador*.

Among these earlier works are "Trying Tackling Iran" (2005), a video piece in which dancers create seven different kinds of movements to seven different pop songs, highlighting the restrictions on public performance in Iran, and "White Wall Tehran" (2007), which she made after she was stopped in the street by Revolutionary Guards for filming them with her video camera. Instead of confiscating the camera, they pointed it at the blank white wall of their headquarters and recorded over the top of the section that showed them, erasing 27 seconds of footage but recording the ambient sound, so in the background you can hear a radio receiver, a spoon stirring a cup of coffee, music playing. It's a particularly potent little video that makes the manner of the guards' censorship somehow more sinister than if they had smashed the camera to bits.

Last year, she was in Tehran putting together "a kind of road movie" that involved driving a Paykan – for 30 years Iran's most popular car, based on a 1967 model of a British Hillman Hunter – from Iran to Germany. It took a month of solid bureaucracy followed by another month of driving and filming. The final installation consisted of the car, the video of the journey (edited down to 11 hours), and 38 framed documents from the massive amount of paperwork involved. Once again she was interested in the transformation of values that occurs in the shift from one society to another: "...the journey of this everyday object in Iran to this object that has special status in Germany". On Ebay, she said, somebody had paid €25,000 for a Paykan, and in the US a man had paid \$40,000. "So it has very different connotations in Europe than in Iran."

All these works, in a way, were preparation for the "Tehran Roof Piece", which was only completed a week before she came to London at the end of last month. The early preparations were done on Google and Skype. Then the challenge was to find the dancers. "Officially there are no dancers in Iran," she said. "There is no contemporary dance on stage anywhere. It's all underground. But you can find dancers, and I had some good contacts through a friend who knows a lot of theatre people in Iran, and also the choreographer – she had some of the best contacts."



Left and below: the project's dancers, four men and eight women, rehearse for the filming in secret in Tehran



They were able to find a rehearsal space, and gradually they put together a team of dancers. To begin with, some of them dropped out, and there were changes in the group, but eventually she put together the final 12: four male dancers and eight women. When it came to filming, some of the performers were worried that they would be identified, and Razmi was careful not to show them in close-up. Others were less concerned. "Although dancing is banned," Razmi said, "apparently there is something allowed called 'rhythmical movement'. One of the dancers said to me, 'Don't worry, we don't call this dancing...'"

The final movements would be improvised, as they were in Brown's piece, but the rehearsals helped the dancers get to know each other, and because they couldn't have real-time rehearsals on the roof, they had to be completely prepared.

"We had to set up some basic rules – like don't be too fast, and like, be large [she makes expansive gestures, opening her arms wide] because there are big distances between one dancer and the next. [Trisha Brown had required similar qualities: "Vast scale. Clear Order".] So when we rehearsed we were just trying some movements, not even saying, 'You are the first' or 'You are the 12th.' So everyone had the same basis to work from. But the final piece was definitely improvisation, within the basic rules we had set."

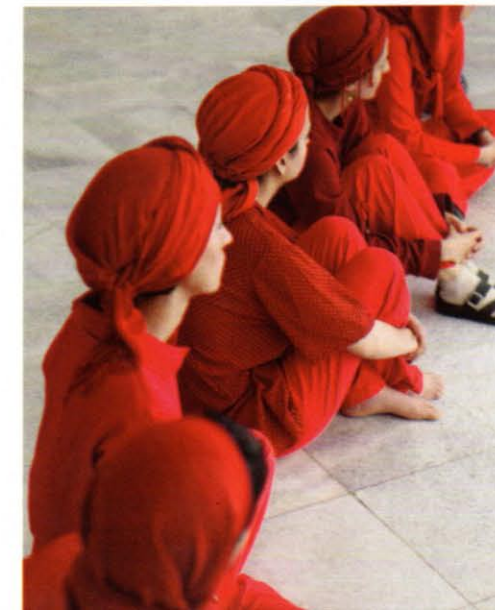
Then they had to find a location. They chose a quiet residential neighbourhood in the north of Tehran. From the rooftops, looking north, are the Alborz mountains; to the south, the city, looking like any other modern city, a mess of skyscrapers and satellite aeriels, which are officially illegal and regularly torn down.

"We started on a friend's roof," Razmi said, "and from there made our way somehow. Even with the roofs, we had to be flexible, because people changed their minds. One day they said, yes, OK, you can use the roof, and then somehow they got afraid, and said no. We used Google Maps, but we had to

be really fast and really flexible. We had to have a definite plan."

Brown's original piece was performed by 12 men and women, across the roofs between 53 Wooster Street and 381 Lafayette Street in 1971. The piece was performed again, in 1973, between 420 Broadway and 35 White Street, and this time it was photographed by Babette Mangolte and later transferred to video. (Some of it can be seen on YouTube, set to The Blue Nile's 1983 "A Walk Across the Rooftops", and also in a film narrated by curator Lydia Yee, from the exhibition *Pioneers of the Downtown Scene, New York 1970s* at the Barbican Art Gallery earlier this year.) In June, the Trisha Brown Dance Company celebrated the 40th anniversary of "Roof Piece", performing it around the High Line, the old elevated railway line that runs down the west side of Manhattan, which has recently been made into a park. Ten (rather than the original 12) dancers improvised on a series of roofs near the southern end of the line, in Chelsea.

In 1971, Trisha Brown had only asked permission from the tenants in the building, not from the city



authorities. Razmi, though, planned to film each dancer separately, and needed some kind of official sanction. "If you have 13 cameras, it definitely looked like a big thing, so we decided, OK, we should ask permission, so we said we were doing a documentary about neighbourhoods and architecture in Iran, and making a really nice story about it, so we got permission no problem at all."

"We used some construction sites, because it was easier to ask the workers if we could go up, rather than to ask private owners. So we used construction sites and ordinary roofs. I tried to use the different levels, so that you could be looking down and then up. There is really bad smog in Tehran, so the visibility is always bad. And we had to be really fast. We needed to have perfect timing, because we only had a small window of time."

In the end it took three tries, on three separate occasions. The first time, the cameras didn't turn up until the mid-afternoon, when it was too late to start working. The second time the man in charge of a building in which they had originally been given permission to work suddenly became suspicious and angry and threatened to call the police. So, once again, they had to stop. In fact, there couldn't be a better trailer for Razmi's project than the video footage of this encounter: in the background is the composed figure of a male dancer dressed in red, going gracefully through his movements, while the furious man in charge lurches in and out of the frame, in close-up, yelling into his phone. It doesn't really need translation.

Finally, on the third take, they completed both sequences, back and forth. Razmi transferred the footage on to her computer then emailed it home.

The installation at Frieze will be the first time the film has had an audience. I wondered to what degree Razmi felt it was putting the dancers or herself at risk. If Trisha Brown's original roof piece came to symbolise the freedom enjoyed by her community in its time, Anahita Razmi's re-enactment suggests the opposite, highlighting the restrictions that not only dancers and artists but hundreds of thousands of Iranians have to live with.

For herself, Razmi said, if she was to be prevented from going back to Iran, "OK I can work with that situation," but for the dancers: "I mean, we're not shouting, we are not making any movements that suggest protest. We are relating to political issues, but not directly. We are doing it in a very poetic way."

"I definitely want to see things change there. But when I make work that relates to Iran, I always want to emphasise [that this is] an outsider's point of view. I am raising questions, rather than saying, 'OK this has to be like this.' I don't want to speak on behalf of other people who live with these restrictions every day."

Inside Iran, very few of those people will see her work. She plans to send some copies of the finished piece to the dancers, but, "Showing it? Officially there's no way." **FT**

Anahita Razmi's "Roof Piece Tehran" will be exhibited at Frieze Art Fair, Regent's Park, London, October 13-16, [www.friezeartfair.com](http://www.friezeartfair.com). To comment on this article, please email [magazineletters@ft.com](mailto:magazineletters@ft.com).

For the FT's full Frieze Art Fair coverage go to [www.ft.com/frieze](http://www.ft.com/frieze). See also *House & Home: the art that sells property*

Yes it was dangerous, yes there was risk involved – including the possibility that... the work might not be made at all

◀ without being didactic, without being too straightforward. If she had wanted to show something like an underground meeting of dissidents, something directly political, it might not have worked as well. [But] showing people dancing quite beautifully makes a much stronger point. And it had a relationship with history, with a seminal art piece from the 1970s. When it references Trisha Brown's piece, it is a reinterpretation, rather than a plagiarism or a critique.

"As the selection process continues," McCrory explained, "the selection committee puts together a series of questions to ask the artist: How possible is it? How dangerous is it? How much of a risk is involved in making it?"

In Razmi's case, the answers were yes it was possible, yes it was dangerous, yes there was a lot of risk involved – including the possibility that, due to factors out of the artist's control, the work might not be made at all.

"Whatever you commission," McCrory said firmly, "you are putting your trust in the artist to be able to pull it off."

Above: dancers participate in Trisha Brown's "Roof Piece" in New York, 1971. Left: Razmi works on her video installation

