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FRIEZE: ANAHITA RAZMI
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The 2011 Emdash Award winner and video/performance artist discusses roof top demos in Tehran, censorship and the celebrated choreographer and visual artist Trisha Brown

Anahita Razmi holds up a veil to her eye; the video is entitled 'How your veil can help you in the case of an earthquake'. It's lesson six where you are so shocked or surprised at the tremors that you use a veil to wipe away tears you cry. Political yet humorous, it sums up the half German, half Iranian artists trip through her cultural heritage cut with a pinch of Stuttgart logic. In this interview Dazed talks to Razmi about her Emdash award commission for Frieze Art Fair, an exploration of roof top

demonstrations in Tehran's 2009 election protests. A video installation that references Trisha Brown's 1971 work Roof Piece and makes use of time lapses to interrelate rooftop dancers performances to the context of Tehran's roof space.

Packed with illegal satellite dishes, transmitting foreign media such as BBC Persia, the roofs have become a political space. Satellite television provides the main source of unfiltered global information where only state television is permitted. The Internet is also censored, and during the 2009 protests it was simply cut off. Artists are permitted to exhibit but only with prior permission. Much like the situation during the communist German Democratic Republic works can critique but only indirectly. As a foreign artist Razmi is able to openly discuss current affairs in Tehran but she chooses to while also celebrating Iran's often forgotten rich cultural legacy.

Dazed Digital: Congratulations on the Emdash award, what stage is the commission at right now?

Anahita Razmi: Thank you, at the moment there's actually a lot of organising and planning. I'm doing area research to find out the best place to do the performance. There were certain areas in the 2009 protests on rooftops, which were the centre of protest.

DD: What made the protests on rooftops special?

Anahita Razmi: They were very different. Iranian people were going out on roofs at night and shouting 'death to the dictator' and 'Allah Akbar' from one roof to another and it echoed through the whole city. So, if you tell someone in Tehran you want to do something on the roofs they are apprehensive because it's a political space in a way. After these protests people directly related the roofs to the protests.

DD: You're based in Stuttgart; do you see differences in the work of artists based in Tehran?

Anahita Razmi: My works are always conceptual and political but they also have a sense of humour. When you talk to artists in Tehran of course it's hard for them to have this sense of humour. If you do something wrong you are in jail, that's it. I also think Iranian's are very emotional and I'm quite a rational person.

DD: A similar work to your commission is 'Trying, Tackling, Tehran' which addresses the absence of public dance or nightclubs. Is this part of simply part of Iran's culture?

Anahita Razmi: No, no, it's definitely imposed by the state. If you go back to the times before the revolution there was Persian dance for example. Now everything from theatre to sculpture has certain rules but dance, it's just non existent.

DD: Iran's was a religious revolution, so is it a new form of religion that's prohibited this form of cultural expression?

Anahita Razmi: I don't think religion is the problem. It's just the government uses religion to make up rules that will help them. I mean I know a lot of Muslim people in Iran, who believe in Islam but don't believe in the government you know.

DD: After the protests there was a Facebook group which collected 170 clips of people killed by the regime. Why is your Frieze commission referencing Trisha Brown's piece rather than images direct from the protests?

Anahita Razmi: You take Trisha Brown's dance piece, the history of her work. Of course 'everything is political' but it's not, you know. You take what was done in New York and you take it to another space and it becomes something else. I don't have to do anything else and it becomes a political piece, with different associations, even if I don't change anything. I also like the idea of doing something that is creating movement, not shouting, not saying anything or making a political statement. I really want to avoid this. It gets different references by just doing it. There are so many things coming into the performance and into the piece that are just eminently there.

DD: Do you see yourself creating an original artwork or a continuation of Brown's piece?

Anahita Razmi: No, I think definitely it's a new thing. It takes different references. I'm always directly referencing. I never say I'm working from a blank piece of paper.

DD: And who will actually be involved? A lot of your work looks at gender.

Anahita Razmi: I really wanted to have men and women as performers. It makes more sense with the intention. Definitely not to make it a woman's piece. You have all these things about suppressed women in Iran and of course it's true but everyone is suppressed there. To make it a feminist statement?...definitely not.

DD: It would take away from the piece?

Anahita Razmi: Yes, then you would be thinking what is it feminist? Women dancing? No, no no. Definitely not, it's going to be men and women, fifty-fifty maybe.

DD: Making sure there's no room for interpretation.

Anahita Razmi: Yes. [Laughs]