



FRIEZE 2011
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A study in scarlet

Our critic discovers how rooftop protests in Iran after the 2009 elections inspired a video commissioned by Frieze

David Jays Published: 9 October 2011

In 2009, Iranians took to the rooftops in Tehran, protesting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's alleged vote-rigging in the presidential election. During the night, heartfelt chants and cries of dissent passed from roof to roof. Anahita Razmi, a Stuttgart-based artist with an Iranian father and German mother, draws on these extraordinary protests in a video installation commissioned for the Frieze Art Fair.

How to make art on the roof? In 1971, the American choreographer Trisha Brown redefined contemporary dance with *Roof Piece*, in which dancers sent a chain of improvised movement back and forth across the roofs of Manhattan. For Frieze, Razmi takes Brown's work as a point of departure, but the frisson now is inevitably political rather than aesthetic. When we meet in London, during the autumnal heatwave, Razmi squints at the noonday sun before leading me back into her cool, bare temporary studio — since her return from filming in Tehran in mid-September, she has been plugging away at her screen. "We've taken the same parameters: 12 dancers on 12 roofs, all dressed in red," she explains. "But if you make this jump to contemporary Tehran, you immediately get something totally different, with all the associations that come into the piece."

The Frieze commission is Razmi's reward for winning the Emdash Award, for emerging artists outside Britain. Twelve screens will be spread through the fair, placed high above the art-hungry throng. As with Brown's original piece, Razmi shows the potency of silent communication: on Tehran's rooftops, you find the illicit satellite dishes that pepper the city. "They're everywhere," she explains. "On every roof, you find two or three. In Iran, the internet is censored and really slow, so people watch TV from foreign countries. If they are destroyed, people are just like, 'Okay, it's destroyed, we'll buy another one.'"

The tall, angular Razmi often features in her own videos; these include an absurdly solemn pastiche of an information film about the uses of an Islamic veil during an earthquake. For this project, although public dance is banned in Iran, she located trained dancers who hold covert workshops and classes in Tehran. They persuaded her to retain the bright red costumes of Brown's original piece. "It's a somewhat hidden performance, but you cannot hide it," Razmi

[Article updates](#)

[Article history](#)

[Following](#)

place in a residential district in the late afternoon, but young Afghan construction workers clustered around to watch.

This project challenged Razmi's controlled way of working. ("Very German," she laughs.) "We had to stay flexible. People sometimes said, 'You can go to our house', but then changed their minds — I understand why people hesitated." During one shoot, the owner of one property stood in front of the camera and threatened to call the police.

"He was getting mad, so we had to stop — he was already on the phone."

Razmi concealed her plans on her visa application. She was too busy for fear, she smiles, but admits that the Iranian authorities are determined to quell the pro-democracy energy rippling through the Arab world. "At the moment, they are really restrictive. You can see the difference even from last year." Police hassled her more frequently about perceived immodest clothing ("What's this? Wear something appropriate!"), and Razmi worried about attracting official attention. She comforted herself that "we're not doing anything political, we're not shouting".

In any case, as Razmi describes it, working around the outlawed is second nature in Iran. "People are used to doing something 'illegal', because it's everything you do. If you have a party in your home, there's alcohol, there's people undressing, all sorts of drugs are somehow available — but it's a big risk. Still, people do it."

Although Razmi's father is Iranian, she made her first visit to the country only six years ago. "My father cannot go back for political reasons," she says. "But I thought, I can still go and see what it's like. From then on, I've been getting more and more into it." And will Iranians themselves be able to access Razmi's work? "My website is not censored — so far."

Roof Piece Tehran will be exhibited at Frieze Art Fair, London NW1, from Thu until next Sun.
friezeartfair.com

This year's big Frieze

Not merely an ice-white shopfloor for the world's art galleries, the Frieze Art Fair sponsors a host of new projects each year, supported by the Emdash Foundation. The Emdash Award 2011 winner is Anahita Razmi.

As for the eight projects commissioned, they include a scoreboard, an aquarium and a luxury yacht. To explain: the Dutch duo Bik Van der Pol provide the scoreboard, which will entertain passers-by with "idioms, quotes and maxims". The aquarium comes from the Frenchman Pierre Huyghe; some lucky seawater creatures will apparently play out a "specific narrative". And the yacht is a cheeky idea from Germany's Christian Jankowski, who will get a boat dealer to flog a proper full-size yacht from a gallery stand. But there is a choice: you can buy it either as a boat or as a Jankowski artwork. Guess which one will cost more?

This being 2011, video and the internet feature in Oliver Laric's piece; the German will create stock video footage, filmed at the fair, that will be offered as public-domain material.

He will then harvest the results. And, jauntily, Laure Prouvost will be creating handpainted signs for the fair. Odds are they won't tell you where the cafe is.

Article updates

Article history

Following

Finally, Frieze offers talks by the likes of the artist Daniel Buren and the film-maker Adam Curtis, as well as a sculpture park, next door in the English Gardens of Regent's Park. Go and see a Rose sculpture by Will Ryman, or Le Banc des amoureux, by Johan Creten — a bronze bench for visitors to sit on.

Article updates

Article history

Following