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*I think everyone should come to Dubai. It would bring a lot of press to the world. Douglas Coupland to Ted Weston, March 2013*

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IMRAN QURESHI **YOUSSEF NABIL** VENICE PREVIEW

## ANAHITA RAZMI

Anahita Razmi and four-legged friend curl up at the Don't Shoot The Messenger boutique, Berlin 2013. 'I like taking risks... putting myself front and centre' (Photography by Maxime Ballesteros)



# SOFT

HOW ANAHITA RAZMI INVOKED THE SPIRIT OF YOKO ONO IN HER RECENT RE-CUT PIECE PERFORMANCE IN DUBAI

*By Arsalan Mohammad  
Photography by Maxime Ballesteros*

ANAHITA RAZMI

**K**

aleidoscopic in her worldview, charismatic and precise in her practise, award-winning installation/performance artist Anahita Razmi's multi-faceted practise surfs disparate and yet congruent concepts within the new tradition of performance art. Whether its dancers balletically reclaiming the rooftops of Tehran in synchronised movements (inspired by

Trisha Brown's 1971 'Roof Piece') or symbolically re-enacting the shapes thrown by mythical male wrestlers in Iranian mythology, or charting the marketplace afterlife of an Iranian Paykan car, Razmi's work is refreshingly low on blunt rhetoric and offers a contemporary, relevant take on video installation and performance that's engaging and rich in allusion.

She is not easily pigeonholed and those who seek to do so are usually wrong. Her work leans more towards subtlety, inference, wry humour and specific gestures. The best of her video installation therefore require no added political payload - rather, by very dint of its existence, ideas, possibilities and eventualities sneaks into the viewer's charmed, captivated brain.

Razmi's international profile has been in the ascendant over the last couple of years - she scooped the prestigious Emdash award in 2011 and was recently feted in 'Automatic Assembly Actions', a solo at Carbon 12 in Dubai. Here, at the exhibition's opening event, Razmi paid homage to Yoko Ono's iconic 'Cut Piece' performance. In the original 1964 performance in New York, Ono crouched in front of an audience, who were invited to take a pair of shears and cut off her garments, leaving her silent, still and in tattered strips of clothing. A bold, confrontational statement on the perception and objectification of women in contemporary society, the piece drew anger, confusion and acclaim from its audience.

Dubai's re-enactment, 'Re Cut/Piece' didn't quite cause mayhem but certainly raised a few eyebrows in a city yet to embrace such outliers of performance art. The transposing of Ono's feminist piece into a critique of a materially-obsessed consumer culture served its environment perfectly.

(From left to right) Anahita Razmi stages 'Re Cut/Piece' at the opening of 'Automatic Assembly Actions' at Carbon 12, Dubai (Courtesy Carbon 12)



*How was the opening in Dubai?*

The performance lasted one whole hour. I never expected that, because at first, people were all so shy! We thought it would last 15 minutes, maybe half an hour but yeah, it went on for an hour and everyone was so shy, even when they were cutting me! It was funny cause people were talking to me when they came to actually cut the dress, they were whispering, saying things like, Oh, I feel really strange doing this, or, please tell me if I cut you! Very polite! Some people were braver than others.

*When Yoko Ono first did 'Cut Piece' in New York in 1964 it got some very aggressive reactions. Why did you want to revive it for Dubai in 2013?*

This whole re-enactment changed some things. The dress I was wearing in Dubai was a Gucci dress, a very luxury item. And I remember there was this one woman who was saying, Oh my God, this is Gucci, I can't cut this! I work in fashion, I just can't. I said, look come on, you're the first one here, you have to! So she just cut out the label which was quite funny. I mean, this was saying OK, I am sitting here, wearing this luxury dress, what does it mean in this place Dubai. There were so many different associations were





coming into the piece which were not originally there in the mind of Yoko Ono in the 1960s. So I found it very interesting. I wouldn't do this anywhere else though, I don't think it would make sense to do this performance in Berlin, for example.

*Do you feel that a performance piece conceived for a specific time and place can work effectively when revived for a new era? This is a question you ask when you see Marina Abramovic isolating her performances from their original context and setting and re-performing them now in entirely different environments...*

Its funny, as Marina Abramovic did all this stuff in the 1970s in the Guggenheim and I think, if we are looking at performance art, a lot of things happened in the 1960s and 1970s that only became really famous afterwards. I went to a talk by Vito Acconci in New York and he said at his early performances, he had almost no visitors! Now of course, his works are well known, but at the time it's interesting to ask, who exactly did see the piece? Not so many people. But it's the documentation that has become very, very known. That's something that's very interesting. That's what's

changed, is seeing the documentation, seeing the photographs and videos.

*Performance is very much at heart to what you do... where did this desire to work with performance come from?*

It's difficult to say! I started at some point doing videos and using myself as the protagonist in the video. I started with that and somehow I continued with it and played around. I cannot really say what was the initial idea - I just liked it. For me, I always felt that as soon as you do something yourself, the relation with the audience becomes very direct and interesting. I'm becoming directly involved, rather than being secure somewhere in the background.

*Being front and centre?*

I like that! It's risky but I like that. That's what my gallery people said too, it's [performance] something very unusual in Dubai, it doesn't happen at all in Dubai. I can't tell, I don't live there but it's a bit - you never know what happens! With the 'Re Cut/Piece', it was also for me a surprise what would happen. I mean, would people come? **HBA**

