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Writing Over the Body, Writing With the Body: On Shirin Neshat's WOMEN OF ALLAH Series

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Writing Over *the* *body*, Writing With *the body*: On Shirin Neshat's *Women of* *Allah* Series

A close-up in black and white. A larger than life-size portrait of a woman covered in black, with a black veil. The veil only leaves her eyes and nose visible whereas her lips and neck are hidden beneath the black folds that frame her face and expands across the image's surface. The woman, with her heavily 'Oriental' made-up eyes, looks at the viewer directly; yet it is a fleeting glance. It is as if the camera's shutter was clicked just as the woman was passing by, capturing the very instant she glimpsed at the camera; this moment is further emphasized by her aslant posture. In her frozen stillness she does not challenge the viewer's gaze; her look does not force the viewer to avert her eyes. It is perhaps because she is facing the viewer through the Arabic letters written across the visible parts of her face, leaving only her eyes exempt from the scribbled lettering. Written in black-and-red ink, the text flows in circles in a loop left bare by the veil and ends (or begins?) just amidst her eyebrows, becoming as hypnotic as the eyes looking at the viewer (Illustration 1).

Another monochromatic portrait of a veiled woman: Here the veil renders her face visible but covers her from head to shoulders. Like the first woman, she stares at the viewer directly, yet hers is a confrontational gaze. It is a straight look that will not be interrupted; she is not going to blink. She holds a gun right in front of her face in her invisible hands (outside the image frame, presumably under her veil). The gun splits her face in two, as well as the Arabic text inscribed on it. Unlike the first one, the text in this image is written in black ink in a linear horizontal manner, again leaving her eyes untouched (Illustration 2).



1. Shirin Neshat, *I Am Its Secret*, 1993

These two images, *I Am Its Secret* and the latter *Rebellious Silence*, are part of Shirin Neshat's photographic series *Women of Allah*. Neshat is an Iranian-born artist living and working in New York. According to Hamid Naficy, Neshat is among a group of 'intercultural artists and filmmakers in the West whose lives and works intersect artistic domains (in her case, photography and film) and cross boundaries of style, genre, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, language and culture' (2000, 43). Neshat left Iran well before the Islamic revolution in 1979, and returned for the first time in 1990. Three years after that visit, she started the monochromatic photo series *Women of Allah* and kept the project going until 1997. In Neshat's words, the series focuses on 'the Islamic revolution in Iran and particularly on the subject of women in relation to violence and politics' (Desai 2003). The photographic series is composed of images of women, mostly of Neshat herself, wearing veils and carrying guns with Farsi calligraphy written all over them. Most of the



2. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994

time, the texts are written across the visible body parts, especially on the face, the hands, and the feet – the only parts of a woman that are allowed to be visible according to the mandatory dress code. Yet, contrary to the potential first impression that might place the handwriting immediately on the body, the text in the series is written over the images, not on the bodies of the photographed women. As such, the handwritten inscriptions open up a medial space between the body and the writing that provides the images with multi-layeredness. Within the *Women of Allah* series, it is among these layers that handwriting as a cultural practice reclaims its aesthetic, cultural, and political reminiscence and constructs the core of this article.

Given that Neshat is an artist working and producing in the heart of the contemporary art scene, it is plausible to argue that her works are on display primarily for the Western viewer.¹ Veils, guns, and Farsi inscriptions are highly loaded signs that invoke in the viewer a historically constructed, multi-layered image of Muslim cultures. Viewed from the present – especially in the aftermath of 9/11 in the US and its global reflection – the veil does not refer to the ‘exotic’ unknown body of the Oriental women anymore; instead it refers to the hotly disputed issues of Muslim women’s emancipation and to the dangerous female ‘terrorist’ carrying a hidden bomb on her body. Guns are not only a reminder of local conflicts in the Middle East but are also an echo of Islamic upheaval, global terrorism, and *jihad* and thus a ‘war on terror’.² Such echoing is further re-enforced by the Arabic inscriptions which may carry different significations such as references to the Quran, *sharia*, or to the ‘repressive’ Islamic states, or to the captions accompanying images on the famous television network *Al-Jazeera* and daily news images from Iraq on the global or national media.

The *Women of Allah* series does not only refer to Iran and Iranian women but are also generic images for the ‘Muslim Other’, materialized in the female body as the site of visual symbols made to represent geographically and historically diverse Muslim societies. On the surface, the images do nothing but reproduce the historically constructed fantasy and fear of the Orient by employing the overused signs of the Orient. However, I interpret these images as a series that problematizes this generic and immediate reading and challenges the Orientalist gaze by appropriating these very Islamic symbols in a deconstructive manner. By masking/ornamenting her culturally hybrid body with the veil and the Arabic script of the Muslim Other, Neshat questions the Western viewer’s already constructed viewing position and attempts to turn the gaze upon itself to reflect on the ‘cultural screen’ upon which these images are encouraged to be seen.³ Yet, the images remain stereotypically Oriental for the viewer regardless of the artist’s intentions. The viewer can only see what she already knows in accordance with the frames made available for interpretation. In their stillness, these images do not invoke such critical self-reflective readings. Yet, images do not stand still; they metaphorically move and along their movement they encourage the viewer to move with them. Thus, I argue that the Farsi calligraphy written across each image in a rhythmic fashion has the capacity to tickle the eye of the viewer and in that capacity encourages an engaged reading

of the image of the Muslim Other, albeit in a problematic manner that I will discuss below.

The handwritten text on the *Women of Allah* images comments on the possibility of cross-cultural viewing positions at the intersections of the visual and the verbal, of looking and reading, of translation and unreadability, all of which convene on the body of the artist that is inscribed with calligraphy. At the crossroads, the super-imposed writing opens up multi-layered interpretations by creating productive tensions first by appropriating and remediating the Islamic calligraphy tradition on the visual plane, and second, by reclaiming the body both as a text that is culturally overwritten and as a medium that self-reflectively overwrites itself.

Calligraphy: becoming visual,
yet unreadable

What is, perhaps, most immediately striking about the series are the texts in Farsi calligraphy super-imposed over the images. Delicately written in circular forms opening out or perhaps closing in, almost hypnotizing in its effect, like a swirling black-and-white wheel, the text on *I am Its Secret* (Illustration 1) pulls the viewer into the depth opened up on the surface of the image. Similarly, the floating letters on the face of the woman in *Rebellious Silence* (Illustration 2) tease the viewer to tackle the text, just behind the rifle, on the inside of the veil, in front of the white background.

What catches the eye is the additional visual dimension, a supplementary space attached to the flat surface of the photographic image. This new space expands from the tactile materiality of the ink, by means of its thickness striking out of the image, beyond its textual character breaking up the interaction of the visual signs that disturb the continuity of a comfortable viewing. In this mixed space, the viewer is tempted to look, to read, and to touch the calligraphic texts. By appropriating the Islamic practice of calligraphy and by attaching an ‘othered’ cultural medium of writing onto the surface of the photographic image, Neshat also reappropriates the synaesthetic experience of the calligraphic tradition. What I find intriguing in such an invitation of viewing is the juxtaposition of two modes of seeing, that of looking and reading, both on the level of the image as a whole and over the written space alone.

The confusion between modalities of looking and reading expands outwards from the calligraphic text, in front of which the non-Farsi reader/viewer finds herself unable to read, towards the image, and thus merges visual signs into verbal ones and vice versa. This intermingling of modalities is one of the recurring traits of an encounter with the Islamic calligraphy tradition. Calligraphy has been the most important practice of the visual arts within Muslim cultures, and is one that populates the visual field in forms ranging from manuscript writing to architectural facades and building interiors carved onto stone, almost like an ornamental

graffiti, or framed and hung like a painting. Regardless of the surface it ornaments, the main objective of calligraphy within Muslim cultures is to convey a message of a strictly linguistic order. As a practice of manuscript reproduction, calligraphic writing definitely communicates the written in a legible form. Even practiced as 'pure' architectural decoration, calligraphic texts may still be 'informative inscriptions' (Grabar 1978, 116-117) that completely fulfill their linguistic function of transmitting a message, often a religious one. Nevertheless, as Valerie Gonzales states, calligraphic inscriptions can also go beyond 'this universal function of writing and completely lose their function of objective linguistic signaling by transforming themselves into illegible forms, sometimes even into meaningless epigraphic type called "pseudo-Arabic"' (Gonzales 2001, 99) where beauty, complexity and sophistication gain prominence. In this sense, most of the decorative Islamic calligraphic works, whether on an architectural space or on the surface of a simple object, tend to subordinate the linguistic and semantic functioning to a visual function that invokes the aesthetics of writing and also that of the pleasure of looking.

In such works, the exaggerated rhythm, the excessive decoration and the overstated figural manifestation of the lettering overrides the intentional content of the text. This transformation from verbal to visual, then, interrupts the interplay between the signifier and the signified on the scriptural level and encourages an iconographic reading brought on by the highlighted visuality of the inscription that makes the text illegible, yet visually stimulating. When calligraphy is so elaborated or distorted and manipulated that it can hardly be read, it suggests to the pious Muslim a well-known Quranic text or literary work, or a religious phrase, and it lets the viewer's memory and imagination supply the rest. In this respect, the experience of the viewer of the calligraphic works is beyond a simple act of reading; it is an aesthetic experience that is collectively shared on the basis of a performance of cultural memory and as an enactment of individual revelation.⁴

In her *Women of Allah* series, Neshat complicates the visual tradition of calligraphy in a very similar manner. Neshat here imposes the aesthetics of calligraphic writing onto the photographic image and the very corporeality of the letters opens up an aesthetic scriptural space on the visual surface. As such, the images suggest a viewing position that oscillates between reading and looking at the image. As stated before, this intermingling of modalities of seeing is one of the main traits of Islamic calligraphic practice. Yet, in Neshat's series, the juxtaposition of the modalities gains cross-cultural significance. If the photograph represents the triumph of the Western eye by confirming the perspectival laws which so long constituted the Western norm of vision, as argued by Comolli and others (quoted in Silverman 1996, 127), Neshat reclaims this primacy in Islamic cultures of the visual over the written word in which the divine 'invisible' truth reveals itself by means of the spatio-temporal materiality of speech and scripture. In the series, then, two different signifying systems carrying their respective cultural connotations conflate, or, are translated into each other's language, by highlighting the visual character of the written and infecting the visual with the stain of the verbal.

However, it is less the act of reading than that of looking that overrules the image as the non-Farsi viewer/reader of these images is left helpless in front of them, primarily because, in her exhibitions, Neshat usually does not provide translations of the texts.⁵ Although the script is written in clear and legible Farsi script, it remains completely unreadable to the non-Farsi reader. The scripted letters ask to be read, as it were; the viewer is invited to be the reader of the text while the reader's inability to read them is already presumed. The act of reading is both promised and prevented, which creates a desire to read that will not be fulfilled. From such a paradoxical viewing position, the calligraphic inscriptions function in a manner similar to that of the highly manipulated and distorted traditional decorative Islamic calligraphy that becomes illegible. Through Neshat's remediation of the calligraphic tradition, where unreadability is emphasized in the absence of a readable text, the inscriptions on the photographic images encourage a diverse mode of signification rather than referring strictly to the linguistic signifiers. For the viewer of these images, confronted by their unreadability, the calligraphic text becomes a generic visual sign, much like the veil and the gun now do in a homogenous manner. Resembling the experience of the Muslim in front of the illegible calligraphic texts in which the illegible signifies a well-known religious text or familiar phrase, Neshat's handwriting encourages the viewer to interpret the images in a similar way. The immediate 'reading' of the unreadable Farsi text relates to the Quran in a way similar to a Muslim standing in front of an illegible text. In an interview, Neshat stated that she has often been asked if the inscriptions were taken from the Quran and, according to curator Igor Zabel, this seems to be a natural question, 'given the prevalence of stereotypes about Islamic fundamentalism, in which the Quran is compulsory – the only possible – text' (Zabel 2001, 22). For the Western viewer any reference to Quran, as the 'only text' governing the Muslim world, would invoke the notion of oppression, backwardness, and eventually religious terrorism in relation to contemporary Muslim societies. Especially since the texts are written over the female body, the viewer may assume that the texts were quotations pertaining to the status of women and the association would invoke that of the suppression of and the violence against women, as well as evoking issues of freedom and equality within Muslim societies.⁶

However, Neshat plays with the potential signification that is at work here. The texts that Neshat quotes – visually and literally – are taken from famous Iranian feminist poets' works and most of the time they are critical of the masculine ideology of contemporary Iranian society.⁷ Certainly, most viewers are excluded from the meaning of the text because they are unable to read the Arabic script and understand the Farsi language. Yet, I believe that this potential viewer disability is exactly what Neshat is hinting at, supported by the unavailability of the translated texts in the exhibitions. The viewer who fails to read the image in the absence of a translation interprets it through an Orientalist discourse that defines the Muslim Other by means of historically constructed culturally mediated stereotypes. In fact, this encouraged 'misreading' implicitly whispers to the viewer that rather than the veil concealing the body, it is the Western discourse about the Muslim

world that obscures the viewers' eyes. From the unreadable text of the so-called Orient written on the female body, the silence turns into a rebellious scream that expands towards the veil, to the gun, to the non-white female body and questions the dynamics of the cross-cultural viewing positions and the possibility of visual translation.

In fact, the female body, mostly that of the artist herself, demands interpretation as much as the calligraphic texts do. The body in these images is an effect of translation and transformation from the 'natural' feminine body to a bearer of culture; from the site of submission to a surface overwritten by resistance; from the generic anonymous Oriental body to the culturally marked female body. And all these translations take place at the convergence of the handwritten texts that contour and fill the images with the bits and pieces of a fragmented female body.

writing over the body,
writing with the body

The *body*, as Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punishment*, has been historically and discursively constructed as a site of contesting power structures. Throughout his analyses, Foucault shows how the body, in its very materiality, does not stand in external relation to power, but is 'marked, stamped, invested, acted upon, inscribed, and cultivated by a historically contingent nexus of power/discourse' (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 113). Accordingly, in the history of Islamic societies, the body, particularly the female body, has constantly emerged as a controversial symbolic site of these contestations of power structures, primarily by attempting to regulate its activities by prescribing clothing practices. In Iranian society, while the unveiled female body was turned into the carrier of the 'modern' Pahlavi regime, the re-veiling of this body in the context of the Iranian Islamic revolution served as a compulsory statement of its ideology. However, it is almost impossible to understand the 'internal' politics of the veil in isolation from its colonialist and neo-colonialist construction and politics, as in the cases of Algeria and Afghanistan, for example, where stripping women bare from the veil is seen as a form of emancipation. In both cases, the veil becomes a visual sign of difference that demarcates the 'Muslim' women from the 'Western' other in a similar manner that it severs inside from outside, private from public. From the Western perspective, the difference of the veiled body is constructed by means of the formulation of a lack, the lack of agency, as well as the passivity of a silenced and oppressed invisible body contrasted with the presumable truth and naturalness of the unveiled Western body.⁸

However, in the *Women of Allah* series, the veiled feminine body as the object and target of power gains a different signifying power through the calligraphic inscriptions, which translate the body into a culturally engraved site of resistance. The quoted inscriptions, in a subtle way, suggest that the feminine body has multiple cultural skins with multiple significations: the material veil, which both 'erases

and enforces embodiment' (Moore 2002, 3) and the textual skin that overwrites the body that both suppresses and enables the subject with creative agency and cultural identity. It is between these skins – including the skin of the image – that the body is transformed and translated at the very moment when the non-Farsi reader/viewer fails to give a voice, and hence meaning, to the text that repels the undemanding cross-cultural viewing position. As I suggested before, the handwritten inscriptions that the viewer fails to interpret or 'read' as verses from the Quran, are, in fact, excerpts from the works of contemporary Iranian writers, such as Forugh Farrokhzad, Tahereh Saffarzadeh, and Monirou Ravanipur, whose works have feminist overtones and are mostly in stark opposition to the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. The handwritten quotes from these 'militant' writers, then, imply that the culturally inscribed feminine body is not only a site for subordination and coercion but is also a space for creative and subversive processes. In this capacity, the images suggest that the viewer read the female body as a cultural text that is entirely overwritten, yet it is not the body of the victim anymore; it is a culturally inscribed body that is also a site of memory that remembers the repressed stories and does not shy away from showing it. However, the visible part of the text that is exposed by the frame of the veil does not communicate with the viewer, who, in turn, questions the universality of the body as text that can be read cross-culturally.

Aside from problematizing the cross-cultural reading of the generic anonymous body of Muslim women, Neshat also challenges her culturally hybrid multiple skins by writing over the image of her own body. It is less by means of (dis)guising her body as the veiled cultural other than by transcribing texts in her mother tongue over and over onto the image of her body that Neshat negotiates and appropriates her diasporic, or exiled, Iranian cultural identity. Writing is what carries culture in much the same way that handwriting identifies individuals. Neshat's work deals with both the personal and the cultural. By writing in Farsi she reclaims herself in terms of a culture that pays homage to the written word. Like the humble calligrapher who writes the 99 beautiful names of Allah, or *basmalah* over and over again, Neshat fills in her blank face, the face without cultural remarks, with the roundness and loops of the Arabic letters. In this respect, I read the artist's deployment of the practice of writing over the body, and especially on the face, as an implicit appropriation of the repressed tradition of *Hurufism* (*harf*, pl. *huruf*: letter) that sublimates the divine character of the Arabic alphabet and the practice of its inscription.⁹ The *Hurufi* sect reworks the Islamic belief of the Divine Pen (*al-Qalam*) by writing the realities of all things (*al-haqa'iq*) upon the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawh al Mahfuz*) and upon the pages of that archetypal book that is none other than the Quran, and further believes that the human body, and especially the face, is a text that is already written by the divine. According to *Hurufi* belief, the main elements of the face contain the mystical and the divine letters of the Arabic alphabet. By 'reading' the divine text on the face, the *Hurufi* unravels the divine truth, Allah. As important as unraveling the divine truth, the *Hurufi* practice of reading and interpreting the face is a practice of knowing the self. In line with this understanding, the *Hurufi* calligraphic tradition asserts itself as the ultimate figuration of writing,

or vice-versa, where the human face is twice written: first with the divine letters, and then using calligraphy, in the search for the self and the divine creator.¹⁰

Reinterpreting the *Hurufi* tradition, I read Neshat's works as a search for the self through the cultural practice of writing with the body over the body. By writing the letters of the alphabet of her mother tongue, the artist negotiates Iranian cultural identity and traces her hybrid body with the cultural text of Iranian heritage. This is to say that, instead of searching for unification with the divine by means of individual revelation, Neshat's practice of writing is directed more towards appreciating her diasporic difference through the performance of writing as an established cultural practice. As a result, handwriting becomes both the artist's individual signature and a sign of her cultural hybridity.

However, Neshat does not apply the text directly over her body; she does something quite different. Neshat first photographs herself and then writes over the images of bits and pieces of her body. By doing so, she manages to keep the handwriting authentic and directs attention towards the materiality of writing, and hence towards the body at work, the 'hand' of writing. As such, the lost body of the artist as the photographed or the photographer is brought back by the handwriting that carries the trace of the writing subject on the mechanically reproduced images. The subjectless gaze of the camera that turns the female body into an object of looking is countered by the writing subject and by its corporeal energy, stimulated by the rhythmic inscription of Arabic letters. The formality of calligraphic writing, that is, the flow of letters from right-to-left, the consistency of linear movements, which are always horizontal, directional, and dynamic, becomes an indexical sign of the artist's body executing the text. The manual gestures of the author that oscillate between visibility and invisibility while connecting one letter to the other or separating them from each other, expose the kinetic impulses underlying the act of inscription. From the hand that holds the pen, the movement of writing expands outwards toward the wrist, the elbow, and to the shoulder of the inscriber, and embodies the artist while her hand mimics the shape of Arabic letters. The rhythmic pulses of the letters, their morphing over time, the pressure of the pen, and the thickness of the ink that it leaves on the surface of the photographic image, refer to the artist's body in labor *in durée* of its practical activity. The writing body of the artist that fills the image with temporality also reclaims the generic disembodied image of the Muslim body with an embodied one that is culturally submitted to a regime of gestural/scriptural training.

As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, good handwriting 'presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger' (1979, 152). In the *Women of Allah* series, Neshat's hand, endowed with proper orthography, almost struggles with the practice of writing that has disciplined her body. The viewer is left to observe countless lines flowing in every direction in each image, in which the meticulous process of writing almost appears as a bodily torment where the artist negotiates the Iranian cultural heritage at pains. Within such negotiation, the calligraphic texts mediate between the artist, as a unique individual, and her relationship with the cultural community to which she belongs. In this sense, the script as a cultural

indicator that ornaments the visible parts of the fragmented bodies in the images generates a productive space in which the artist deconstructs and reconstructs her cultural identity so as to appropriate her hybrid body text.

Moreover, the artist's writing body is further emphasized by the direct inscription of the texts over the images. Authentic handwriting, in contrast with the endless reproducibility of the photographic image, confirms the writer's individual uniqueness, distinguishing her as a signature and signing her presence at the unique moment of writing. The handwritten text represents the willingness of the artist to communicate with the viewer/reader on a very personal level; the act of writing is almost a confession of the artist as a way of revealing her identity by means of the inclusion of the autographic marks on the images of herself. By doing so, the artist unifies the mechanical image of herself with her bodily self through the act of writing, exchanging blood for ink, fingerprint for pen.

The authentic handwriting not only signifies the uniqueness of the writer but also provides the images with a uniqueness of their own, which otherwise they would not have had. Of the many possible copies, the overwritten ones become the original that distinguish the images from any other photographic work. The photographic negative as the original source of infinite copies hence loses its primacy and is replaced by the authenticity of the written images. In this respect, each and every image in the series becomes unique and repudiates its reproducibility and reclaims the authority that is lost with the prospect of reproduction. As is well known, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin asserts that, by means of the process of mechanical reproduction, the work of art loses its aura, that is, its historical uniqueness, as well as the unique viewing experience of such works. Benjamin does not mention handwriting or calligraphy as an aesthetic experience that would re-invoke the concept of an aura that is lost because of its reproducibility. Although he hints at lithography and print technologies with regard to writing, it is obvious that he does not consider handwriting as having aesthetic qualities and hence capable of inducing aura. As Sonja Neef and José van Dijck state in the introduction of this collection, this lapse in Benjamin's article is revealing, since it neglects the unique visual aspect of handwriting on the one hand and fails to notice the effectiveness of the mechanical reproducibility of handwriting on the other. However, once I have invoked the imageness of calligraphy at work, I find the discussion of the concept of aura productive with regard to Neshat's calligraphic inscriptions.

As I mentioned earlier, the materiality and the plasticity of the unreadable calligraphic text attract the viewer's eye almost in a hypnotic manner towards the scriptural plane it opens up. However, in contradiction to other familiar cultural signs, such as the veil, handwriting presents itself as intimate while keeping its distance. This intimacy, or closeness, is brought on by the images provided by the media from different parts of the Middle East while the letters enjoy the distance of an 'unheard-of symbolic system' as Roland Barthes (1982, 2) would say. Yet the distance does not stem from viewers' failing to read the text but from the sudden embodiment of the artist potentially inscribing verses from the Quran like a talisman, evoking the ritualistic and mystical dimensions of writing, which subordinates the

'emancipated' photographic image to the cult-like value of the written. In this capacity, the handwriting re-enchants the demystified photographic image that provides the image with inapproachability, in line with Benjamin's definition of aura as a 'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be' (222). Moreover, handwriting pulls the photographic image towards the domain of tradition both by emphasizing handwriting's historical function and by invoking the tradition of calligraphic practice. Taken together, the images in the series are covered with an auratic shield that puts them at a distance from the viewer, making the images difficult to consume all at once. The physical distance one has to maintain in front of the larger than life-size images is, then, accompanied by a psychological and cultural distance enforced by the handwritten texts. The imposed distance alters the experience of the contemporary viewer for whom the Muslim women, brought close by the relentlessly repeated media images, are seen through the Oriental/colonial camera that shoots them as powerless veiled victims. Instead of conjuring up the closeness of the already known that would only make the veil transparent in order to expose the submitted female body, the auratic distance encourages the viewer to see beneath the opaque veil in order to read the unheard feminine voice that resists. It is along these lines that I interpret the titles such as *Speechless* (1996) or *Rebellious Silence*; even if Muslim women speak and write in their own language, their words remain mute, not because they are unreadable but because they are unheard. In the way that the right-to-left lines of text written across the *Rebellious Silence* speaks out: 'stories of your martyrdom / like martyrdom of the people / remain unheard. / They have no voice, no image, no date, / they are unannounced'.¹¹

In the *Women of Allah* series, Shirin Neshat tries to give a voice, an image, and a date to the Oriental woman by writing over the cross-cultural tensions. Yet, this time, the viewer remains silent because she cannot give a voice to the unreadable handwriting.

Begüm Özden Fırat

SIGN HERE!

Notes

1. Shirin Neshat has exhibited widely in major European and North American cities. Among her most recent solo exhibitions are those held at the Miami Art Museum (2003), Houston Museum of Contemporary Art (2003), Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City (2003), Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy (2002), and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2002). She has been included in numerous international exhibitions and film festivals, including Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany (2002), Sundance Film Festival (2003), Tribeca Film Festival (2003), Locarno Film Festival (2002), 48th Venice Biennale (1999), 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997), and the 5th Istanbul Biennale (1995). Conversely, although her works deal with Muslim societies in general, and with Iranian society in particular, they have never been displayed in Iran or in most of the other Muslim societies. With such an audience profile, I find it plausible to argue that Neshat not only produces in the West but also for the Western viewer. Therefore, throughout the article, I use the term 'the viewer' to refer to the Western viewer, the main consumer of Neshat's art.

2. As Jaqueline Larson (1997) points out, in some of the photographs, like *Stories of Martyrdom* (1994), the brand *Remington*, an American firearms company, is clearly visible on the rifle. For Larson, the visibility of the label in the image refers to the US production of the images such as that of the US-produced rifle, and she interprets the image in relation to the persistence of the American gaze and to what America expects to see. Aside from this possible interpretation, I think that the visibility of the label also comments on the global arms trade and on the US's role as the exporter of arms and the source of conflict in certain parts of the world, in particular the Middle East.

3. I use the term 'cultural screen' in the way Kaja Silverman interprets the Lacanian visual field. The cultural screen, as understood by Silverman, is 'the culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age and nationality' (1992, 135). In the Lacanian model of the field of vision, the screen stands between the subject (of the look) and the infamous gaze. Therefore, wherever the subject looks, she sees through the framework of

the cultural screen including herself and the cultural other.

4. Since the written, as a transmission of the divine words of Allah, has been given primacy in Muslim culture, calligraphic writing, as well as its experience by the viewer/reader, is usually explained in terms of individual revelation. See, for example, Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, London: Tauris, 1990 and *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975; where she discusses the mystical dimension of Arabic letters at length. See also Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987.

5. To my knowledge, the translations of the texts were not included in most of the exhibitions, although there have been exceptions like The Serpentine Gallery, London (July 28 – September 3, 2000) where the translations were provided in the exhibition hall, or the *Women of Allah* exhibition in Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (April 25 – June 7, 1997) that included the translations, not in the exhibition itself, but in the catalogue. Neshat also does not provide the subtitled translations of later video works that followed the *Women of Allah* series.

6. As I was writing this article, Theo van Gogh, a Dutch film director, was assassinated, by a 'fundamentalist' Dutch-Moroccan Muslim. The media claimed that he was killed because of the film *Submission* (2004) that Van Gogh made in collaboration with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch Parliament and the conservative-liberal party VVD. The ten-minute film deals with the oppression of and violence against women in the Muslim world and narrates stories of women beaten and raped by their family members. It includes shots of women with their faces half-veiled, wearing a transparent black chador-like clothes that makes the over-written Quranic verses – dealing with the situation of woman on their bodies, visible. Moreover, one hears invisible whip lashings while the camera wanders through the naked bodies overwritten and freshly wounded by lash strokes. Judged as highly controversial at the time of its broadcast on Dutch television, I believe the film is very superficial in how it discusses women's rights in Muslim societies. Resembling the *Women of Allah* series in the way

it deals with signs of Islam, *Submission* offers a rather simplified stereotypical view that is far from complicating and discussing the issues at stake. As such, contrary to Neshat's work, the film remains mere provocation that does not lead to a productive dialogue. For a discussion of the phenomenon of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the film *Submission* in Dutch socio-political context see, ' "Word alsjeblieft wakker": *Submission*, het fenomeen "Ayaan" en de nieuwe ideologische confrontatie' by Marc de Leeuw and Sonja van Wichelen and 'De obsessie met Hirsi Ali en de broodnodige kritiek op het neo-liberalisme' by Ingrid Hoofd in *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 2005 (4).

7. The text that overwrites *Rebellious Silence* is a poem by Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936) entitled 'Allegiance with Wakefulness' (1980). The quote over the surface of *I Am Its Secret* is an excerpt from Forugh Farrokhzad's (1933-1967) poem titled 'I Will Greet the Sun Again'. Farrokhzad's poetry had an immediate impact in pre-Revolutionary Iran because of its seductive tone and subject matter. In contrast to the emotional and sexual characteristics of Farrokhzad's writings, Saffarzadeh's poetry celebrates the martyrs in the Iran-Iraq war and is emphatically prorevolutionary Iran. She was also one of the few women in the Iranian parliament to represent women's issues after the revolution.

8. For a theoretical discussion of the relation of the veil and embodiment see, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 112-120. For an analysis of how the veil is articulated in nationalist projects in Algeria and Turkey, elaborated through Partha Chatterjee's framework provided in *Nationalist Thought and The Colonial World*, see,

again, Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, especially the chapter entitled, 'The Battle of the Veil: Woman Between Orientalism and Nationalism'.

9. *Hurufism* or *Hurufiyya* is an unorthodox Muslim sect of gnostic-cabalistic tendencies founded by the Iranian mystic Fadl Allah of Astarabad, who was flayed to death for his heretical beliefs in circa 1401. According to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, one of the tenets of the Hurufi doctrine is the idea that God reveals himself in the Word and that words that are made up of sounds are always associated with letters. The total number of letters (and their numerical value according to the abjad) is the total of all emanating and creative possibilities of God and is God himself made manifest. For the relation between calligraphic tradition and the Hurufi influence, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*.

10. Annemarie Schimmel notes that the lasting influence of the *Hurufis*, 'who had systematized the equations between letters of Arabic alphabet and features of the human face or the human body' on the scriptural pictures of the *Bektashi* order, has strong *Shi'i* influences. Schimmel gives examples of scriptural pictures that show human faces comprised of a mirrored Ali and the names of *Panjtan* (Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn) and Allah. See, Annemarie Schimmel, 'Calligraphy and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey', 247-248.

11. The translation of Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poem 'Allegiance with Wakefulness' is taken from Artspeak Gallery's exhibition catalogue *Shirin Neshat 'Women of Allah'* on page 28.

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