

Shirin Neshat

(Qazvin, Iran, 1957)

The male and female universe, the sensuality of bodies and the violence of war, Islamic and Western cultures, the urgency of modernity and the richness of tradition, the brilliance of dazzling white and the profundity of black: in Shirin Neshat's art different elements coexist, articulated through tensions specific to contemporary life. The encounter between different worlds is part of the artist's own personal biography. Born and raised in Iran, Neshat emigrated to the United States to pursue her education, then remained there when the Iranian revolution imposed the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, beginning in 1979. She did not pursue a career as an artist, or at least not until, after going back to her native land in 1990 and collecting hundreds of images during the period of the war between Iran and Iraq, she once again returned to America. What she saw in the streets of Iran and then observed in newspapers acquired further significance once it was inserted into a Western context. In the first photographs she produced in her New York studio she personally embodies forceful contradictions, placing her female face alongside the barrel of a pistol, or placing a rifle between her bare feet. After creating these works, where one already sees the use of black and white and a clearly cinematographic approach, she focused on the creation of an extensive photographic series of portraits of women, *Women of Allah*, 1993–1997, characterized by the presence of poetry in Farsi script, which she meticulously wrote out by hand. In subsequent years Neshat broadened her artistic language to include video and film, resulting in works of growing complexity in which, in addition to images in motion, music plays an important role.

The encounter of opposing forces, references to Islamic culture, sound and poetry remain central to her work, including her most current production. In *OverRuled*, 2012, she refers to Mansur Al-Hallaj, one of the most controversial figures in the history of Islamic mysticism, in order to reflect on the persecution of artists and their search for creative autonomy. In nineteenth-century Persia, Mansur Al-Hallaj was imprisoned for nine years because of his poetry and teachings, which preached the idea of a mystical union with the divine, as seen in one of his most famous works "Ana 'l-Haqq," which can be translated as either "I am the truth," "I am the Real," or "I am God." Brought before a court of theologians, he was finally condemned to death, after undergoing horrible torture. (MB)