

When I open my eyes, I see my native land and its lines on the horizon

Thomas Kellein: *The Home of My Eyes. The contemplation of eyes that want to see the world*

Black clothes, black photographs. A slightly stiff posture, occasionally a faintly scowling face. Who are they, these people from Azerbaijan? An elderly gentleman, *Asgar*, perhaps 67 years old, looks like a high-ranking functionary of a rigidly organized, possibly communist party. Another man, *Mudhat*, with a light gray moustache and dark hair, could be a wrestler or perhaps a strong peasant who has worked hard and crushed many an obstacle with his great energy. A third man, *Vagif*, poorly shaved, with his head slightly lowered, looks comparatively weak and almost sad. His life may not have been a joyride. Alongside these figures, we see young people, handsome men, beautiful girls, radiant women.¶ **While the group** in the medium-sized photos let their arms hang, the people depicted in a smaller format—they are the majority—all put their hands together in various ways, some folded, others crossed, or with fingers intertwined, or else with the palm of one hand covering the fingers of the other, as if for protection.¶ **What do these variations signify?** There is stagecraft at work here. Shirin Neshat specified black clothes, dark backgrounds, dangling arms and folded hands as a choreographer might have. How precisely did her subjects adhere to these instructions? There is a woman, the particularly attractive *Malaksima*, who did not fold her hands but instead, perhaps inadvertently, put a hand to her heart. But she appears to have had no objection to presenting her face and body for a frontal portrait. Except she is evading the camera a little, in contrast to the rest of the group, by slightly turning her head to the side.¶ **Neshat herself**—who regards Azerbaijan, where the subjects of her portraits were born, as a bit of home—is not concerned with clothes, and only proximately with hands. She is evidently concerned with human beings and with faces, but in what respect? She has captured them in a dark space, frontally posed, each of them facing the camera. As a result they have all become essentially equal, as if they had been standing interchangeably in a row. A brilliant white shines from their eyes, and this is not only because the flash was reflected in them when the

picture was taken. The eyes themselves provide the contrast. They shine out as bright spots from the dark foundation, as do teeth and fingernails here and there. Because the iris and the lens appear to be a deep black, the eyeball is strikingly white in contrast. No one's eyes are wide open, nor has anyone, except for *Firuzza*, an elderly woman who may be blind in one eye, lowered their gaze as if for contemplation.¶ **Neshat deliberately photographs** people in a uniform manner; this highlights the difference in their faces—a characteristic mark of this series. The expression on each of these faces is alert. So there they stand, human beings in a space we cannot identify, gazing into a camera, holding their hands in a position that suggests prayer.¶ **Neshat is the telepathic medium** who directs the event. She does not operate the camera, does not develop the prints; rather, it is she who builds trust, patiently weaves complex strands of connection, conducts conversations—for instance to suggest the folding of hands without telling or showing people precisely how that is to be done. No one is told to smile; consequently smiles appear only inadvertently here and there. Nor do these men and women look grim, anxious, or perturbed, except where a particular mood was already within them. The sameness of apparel, background, and physical position makes them seem not only comparable, but on an equal footing. They stand separately, but due to the homogeneous framing and positioning of the portraits in the exhibition space, they appear like a social assembly of people who belong together.¶ **Art-historically**, they fulfill the role of ancient statues, of society portraits, of devotional pictures, perhaps also of encyclopedic attempts at capturing human facial expressions. Neshat had Titian's student El Greco in mind. The work is intended, she says, as a portrait of a culture. But which culture?¶ **Here are characters**, in the theatrical sense of the word: the confident young man, perhaps *Fugar*; the pious innocent, perhaps *Gabil*; the warmhearted woman, perhaps *Ilgara*; the expectant one, perhaps *Salima*; the stern *Agayar*, the serene *Samima*, the lovely blond child *Anna*.

We see them—thanks to photographic technology—in close proximity. They are somewhat like ourselves, a paraphrase of our child perhaps, of our mother, our grandfather, or an uncle we barely knew. Yet they stand far away from us, for they appear in two dimensions and without color.¶ **It is only when one takes** into account the factor of time in the reception of art that our eye meets with the skin of the portrayed persons and discovers faintly handwritten words, long and entire sentences in Farsi, inscribed everywhere on the white parts of the photographs, with the exception of the eyes, lips, and fingernails. Almost the entire surface of the skin is covered with a delicate tissue of words. Neshat arranged to have each photo filled with rich reading material, from the upper edge of the forehead to the hands and arms underneath; the execution of this part of the work was, once again, done by someone other than herself.¶ **The persons appear** paratactically as individuals, each endowed with the same rights as the others, but all of them were tattooed on the photograph as if by an unknown poetry. The ink that can be seen on the photos is dry; the texts are clearly written. They are decipherable. But who, except for speakers of Farsi, can read what is written here and appreciate the contents, the cultural materials, that have been associated with the subjects of these portraits?¶ **The texts have been applied** in surprisingly straight lines, apparently with the help of a stencil. In the process of being covered with script, each photo was alternately hanging and lying flat.¹ As stated previously, Neshat did not do the writing, but the stage directions were hers. The words begin precisely on the right side of the hairline and extend, row beneath row, from right to left across the forehead. They start at the right ear and run across the tip of the nose to the left ear. In the case of bearded men, no script was applied to the radiant eyeballs and the lips, or to the entirely black parts of the face. But on the hirsute arms and chests of the men one sees writing as well. *Agayar*, for example, is covered with writing, even in places where it is difficult to read. Who can read it, who might read it?

What does this kind of poetry signify? One has to step up close to the people in order to decipher the writing.¶ **Neshat is concerned** with a country and with a culture. She asks each of her subjects in turn what “home” means to them. One of them answers: *I soaked up the cultural, emotional and material side of home. I am home.*

A few hours seemed like a lifetime

What is a society exactly, what is it that a seemingly heterogenous group of people have in common? Herodotus treats of the origin of human society in his *Histories*, written in the 5th Century B.C.² According to him, the nomadic Iranian horse-riding people known as the Scythians believed in a first man, an original patriarch who lived in a country that was still empty. This first man was said to have had three sons. During the sons’ rule four golden tools were said to have fallen from the sky: a plow, a yoke, a battle axe, and a bowl. From these tools arose the various tribes, who henceforth pursued different activities. Plow and yoke founded agriculture. The axe enabled the Scythians to arm themselves as a people. The bowl, on the other hand, as an instrument of ritual sacrifice and a vessel for the consumption of sacred drinks, engendered religion. The idea of material production, war, and culture as fundamentally different activities, and of the three human estates, had been born, and was, it seems, immediately consolidated historically—a supremely successful idea, as evidenced by other ancient texts that were widely distributed in India as well as in Persia and also in the West after Plato. The first man, the empty land, the tools that formed the foundation for various professions—all these may be legends, but they occupied the minds of poets, artists, and philosophers until far into the Age of Enlightenment. In 1784, Immanuel Kant, in his “Idea for a universal History with a Cosmopolitan aim”, wrote that in the framework of this triad man is driven “by ambition, tyranny and greed, to obtain for himself a rank among his fellows, whom he cannot stand, but also cannot leave alone.”³

In Shirin Neshat’s works, people from particular societies she has selected are presented as collectives in which the individual may be alone, insofar as he or she feels alone. But—and this is the creative impact and argument of the works—they are precisely not alone, and are never alone. Neshat does not portray sons and daughters of an original father who then become peasants or producers or are schooled as warriors or Amazons, priests or nuns. By dint of the darkness of her photographs, of the white that emerges from black like pure light, by the conscious renouncement of architecture as well as details of cultural refinement, they appear as autochthonous representatives of humanity. They are simpler in appearance and more elemental than we are. They embody a rooted belonging we may still be seeking, if indeed it has ever occurred to us to undertake such a quest. As regards their country and the age they live in, we find them somehow living side by side, physically as well as geographically; but in other works, they are rigorously separated from each other, as a man and not a woman, as a child and not an old man or woman, as human beings shut in or, inversely, free under an open sky, escaped from walled enclosures, in contrast to quiet, perhaps silent perseverance in an enclave. In Neshat’s legendary series *Women of Allah* we see veiled, even hidden women, but occasionally they are armed and show resistance.⁴ In other works we see groups of men taking active and patriotic stances or, alternatively, embodying infinite suffering and pain.¶ **In each case**, the people whom Neshat seeks and finds, photographs and films, are performers. They are models of humanity. They are not actors, for the play is a model of the world contemplated and poetically and dramatically constructed by Neshat. She once said it makes no difference whether she is working in Morocco, Turkey, or Mexico. *I go everywhere to make believe it is Iran.*⁵ She is Iran.¶ **Already in Herodotus** but then again in Plato as well as in many later social theories, there exists in addition to the three basic human activities a fourth power that emanates from the aforementioned father of the

three sons. This power is the king who presides over the people; he is the superordinate factor that guarantees the coherence of an order, or a guiding goddess, for that would become a further possibility in our time, if not earlier. In Neshat’s work it is her artistic directorship that guarantees order in the midst of diversity, it is she herself who, by means of her great intuition and willpower, guides dozens of models, as well as her assistants, the indispensable photographers, writers, camera people, producers, and workshop directors, who see to it that her work takes the form of a collective event and not a mere lexical sequence of portraits. Thus virtual, thoroughly dramatized collectives take the stage, with an intensity that has earned Neshat the grotesque reputation among Western critics of being herself an Islamist, a champion of ideologies promulgated by the mullahs of Iran, or alternatively an American who misappropriates Iranian culture, which amounts to a comparatively sweeping indictment.¶ **But Neshat** is Homer. She reports as the Odyssee does, she fears slavery, she screams at every sacrifice, she trembles at the sound of the sirens, she weeps quietly and also happily when an artistic homecoming from a fictive location has succeeded after weeks of labor. She listens sensitively before she rules and divides.¶ **The assembly**, Agora in Greek, was in ancient tragedy a great event and always at the same time a place. It is the unity of time, place, and action that in Neshat’s work is rehearsed within a chosen construction until it is finally brought into existence as if in a twelfth hour. Then the separation of private interest and the common good, which is not merely a modern convention but ubiquitous at all times, hence among people in Azerbaijan as well, seems suspended for a moment. *What does home mean to you?* the subjects of the portraits were asked. One of them, 46 years old, said, *Our beautiful land, our flag, the mountains.* The viewer sees none of that. Another participant, considerably younger, said, *Home means family, friends, and lots of good food.* But Neshat’s pictures show no food, nor, with just a few early exceptions, do her photos show any color.

[illegible]

¹ *Layla S. Diba* profoundly explores the topic of writing in Neshat's work in this catalogue.

² *Compare Herodotus*, Histories, edited by Michael A. Flower and John Marincola. Cambridge University Press 2002. For descriptions of the Scythian Campaign, see Book 5.

³ *Immanuel Kant*: Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim, Fourth Proposition (translated by Allen Wood), In: Rorty, Amélie O./Schmidt, James: Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim, Cambridge 2009, p. 13. Originally published in: *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, November 1784, S. 385–411. (*Immanuel Kant*: Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht).

⁴ cf. Shirin Neshat. Women of Allah. Marco Noire Editore. Torino 1997.

⁵ Quoted from: Shirin Neshat. Facing History, edited by Melissa Chiu and Melissa Ho. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Smithsonian Books, Washington, DC, 2015, p. 19.

⁶ *Immanuel Kant*, What is Enlightenment?, in Immanuel Kant, On History, edited, with an introduction by Lewis White Beck. Translated by Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, and Emil L. Fackenheim. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, pp. 3–10. Originally published in: *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 1784. (*Immanuel Kant*: Was ist Aufklärung?).

Her societies are not feudal, not democratic, not capitalist, not communist. What is at issue here is the idea of a contemporary collective moment in a view that could be that of dreams, and how that moment gives rise to strong male and female characters, how it permits the invisible presence of tools as well as the ordering agency of a fictitious fourth power nurtured by the artist. The models may sing, be silent, stand, walk about, every one of them unique in these choreographed moments, yet they appear to be guided by an invisible hand. If we imagine them to be representatives of the collective unconscious, then we must conclude that the artist and her collaborators have slipped into C. G. Jung as if into a great marionette. ¶ **The protagonists** are not relieved of their worries, their feelings, their life experience, their wrinkles, but their joy and their beauty are also put to serviceable use for others, for ourselves. What is at issue is art with the purpose of evoking a momentary identification. The models are assembled like parts of a machine in order to collaborate, without precise previous arrangements, for the artistic purpose. There are artists who expose their models, or who adopt disguises themselves. Neshat shrouds her people, occasionally cloaks them in quiet spaces or unleashes movement or wind around them in order to endow them with power, an almost divine impetus. At issue is the power of humanity, which may exist for moments but not in reality, only in dreams or in our religions. ¶ **A profoundly utopian vision** inheres in these works. If, according to Kant, “Enlightenment is man’s release from his selfincurred immaturity. Immaturity is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another,”⁶ then Neshat’s models are seers and not clever speakers, are enlightened men and women, not arguing intellectuals. They live in a kind of collective womb, they show, by their clothing, their gaze and through the effects of lighting on their appearance, that they are part of an entirely fictive whole. They break free without destroying this whole because they have discovered something, though as a rule that discovery is only for themselves.

It might be the idea of 35-year old *Farid Abdullayev* from Baku, who says, *The multi-cultural heritage of Azerbaijan is what makes me proud*. He says he does not mean to place his country above the destiny of other countries, or to oppose anyone else’s opinion. ¶ **In numerous works** by Neshat, in photo series and videos, we experience the three es-tates, a seemingly triadic society that encounters itself, whether it wishes to or not, in the form of antagonistic forces and, simultaneously, overlapping groups of personalities. The fourth position in the plot, meanwhile, is not portrayed by a person: But it is nevertheless implicitly present in the writing on the photos, in the music in the films, in the artist’s choreography, and is received by ourselves, the viewers, as we walk back and forth among her works, even in the case of videos, which are occasionally projected onto opposite walls. We study them, ponder them, feel them. We believe in and maybe strongly disbelieve in the society we are witnessing. But Neshat has brought together descendants of artisans, warriors, and priests, male and female, and employed her great art of theatrical staging to turn us briefly into kings and queens in the loge: very close to moments in history, for instance to these people in Azerbaijan, or, as in the video *Roja*, transported into a waking dream of life that moves us profoundly.