



Red signal: a still from Anahita Razmi's video

A study in scarlet

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

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 reasons. "There are neighbours, people who can watch or come and get mad." The shoot took 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