


Anahita Razmi: Frieze Emdash Award Winner



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All images courtesy of the artist.

The Frieze Art Fair Emdash Award 2011 was given to the video and performance artist Anahita Razmi, based in Stuttgart. Razmi's previous work has dealt with issues concerning identity and gender, employing objects with a national and cultural significance or citing the work of high-profile female artists. Her winning proposal carried out in Iran combined both of these features and the shortlist included entries from Australia, Costa Rica, Croatia, France, Germany, India, Israel, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, and the USA. The final work was displayed on multiple screens throughout the Frieze Art Fair and involved the re-enactment of choreographer Trisha Brown's seminal "Roof Piece," which was first performed on 12 SoHo rooftops 40 years ago. However, Razmi's take gave this classic of experimental dance a very different dimension: her video version of Brown's artwork was used as a catalyst to address the violent protests that shook her father's country, Iran, during the presidential election in 2009.

WW: *Congratulations. How did it feel to win the award for your proposal out of 550 applications from all over the world?*

ANAHITA RAMZI: Great. I was like, "Oh, wow." But then I thought, Now I have to carry out my concept in such a short amount of time. The award was announced in May and was to be completed by October. It was quite a tight schedule. I flew to Tehran twice and the piece was finished just one month before the Frieze Art Fair.

WW: *Describe the 12 video installations set up through the Frieze Art Fair. I noticed they were placed fairly high up so it was a unique level of engagement for fair goers.*

AR: Yes, 12 screens were spread throughout the architecture of the fair, so it was not exclusive to a booth. The screens were all placed high up; it made sense to the artwork because all the videos were showing 12 dancers on the roof.

WW: *So how did you come across the inspiration of your concept, Trisha Brown's 1971 rooftop piece?*

AR: It is one of the most known performances of her work, I would say. And I always knew it for a long time; I never thought, "Okay, I'll just do a reenactment of this." But when I connected the performance to this Iranian context, where we have the same setup...12 dancers in Tehran, the whole concept changes. To do a reenactment in Tehran would really make sense because it has all these different associations – even saying, "Okay, we go to the roofs in Tehran," which are so loaded with other images, like the protest images of two years ago. And then saying, "Okay, if we do this performance, it's about transmission of movement, of body movement." And that was also the thing that was really important – the protests in Iran used the rooftops...the shouts, the voices were echoing from one roof to the other.

WW: *What were some of the challenges in filming dances on the rooftops in Iran?*

AR: [There were] many, many difficulties. Upon entering the country; I couldn't say what I wanted to do or officially say, "I am an artist. I want to do an art piece," or, "a dance piece." I entered the country as tourist. Like, even making a fake plan of what you want to see, blah blah blah, so that they won't get suspicious at all. You don't say you're an artist – never, ever.

WW: *Was the permission for filming initially what you had asked in obtaining approval?*

AR: We said we wanted to make documentation about architecture, and neighborhoods in Tehran. So it made sense that we were going to the roof. But it still did not make it legal, but it helped even convincing people to go onto their roofs and shoot. My father said, "Don't try to hide it." You know, "Try to make up a good story," and then it just worked.

WW: *So, dancing isn't allowed in Iran?*

AR: Yeah, that's it. For every art form, like visual arts or whatever – theater – of course, it is censored in Iran, somehow. There is a committee looking at every exhibition, looking at every theater play. But contemporary dance is just not there. There's no dance.

WW: *What was the experience like while filming and what were the reactions from locals?*

AR: We had to have three tries of actual performance. We were really lucky it worked out the third time. The second time a guy came and was really getting angry already on the phone calling the police.

WW: *So after all of this, how has the feedback been at Frieze and how does it feel?*

AR: There is so much positive feedback that made it worth the challenges. There is a big Iranian community in London and I met a viewer who was there in Tehran when we were filming. Since we cannot show the performance in Iran, it made the video even more powerful.

WW: *How has your perspective, being half-German and half – Iranian, helped you as an artist?*

AR: I have lived my whole life in Germany. It's an in-between position, but for me quite an interesting position. I don't want to speak for people who live there. I don't want to explain the country. It's more about making relations. It's really about these different kinds of relationships of expression between, let's say – New York first, then Tehran, and then London.



