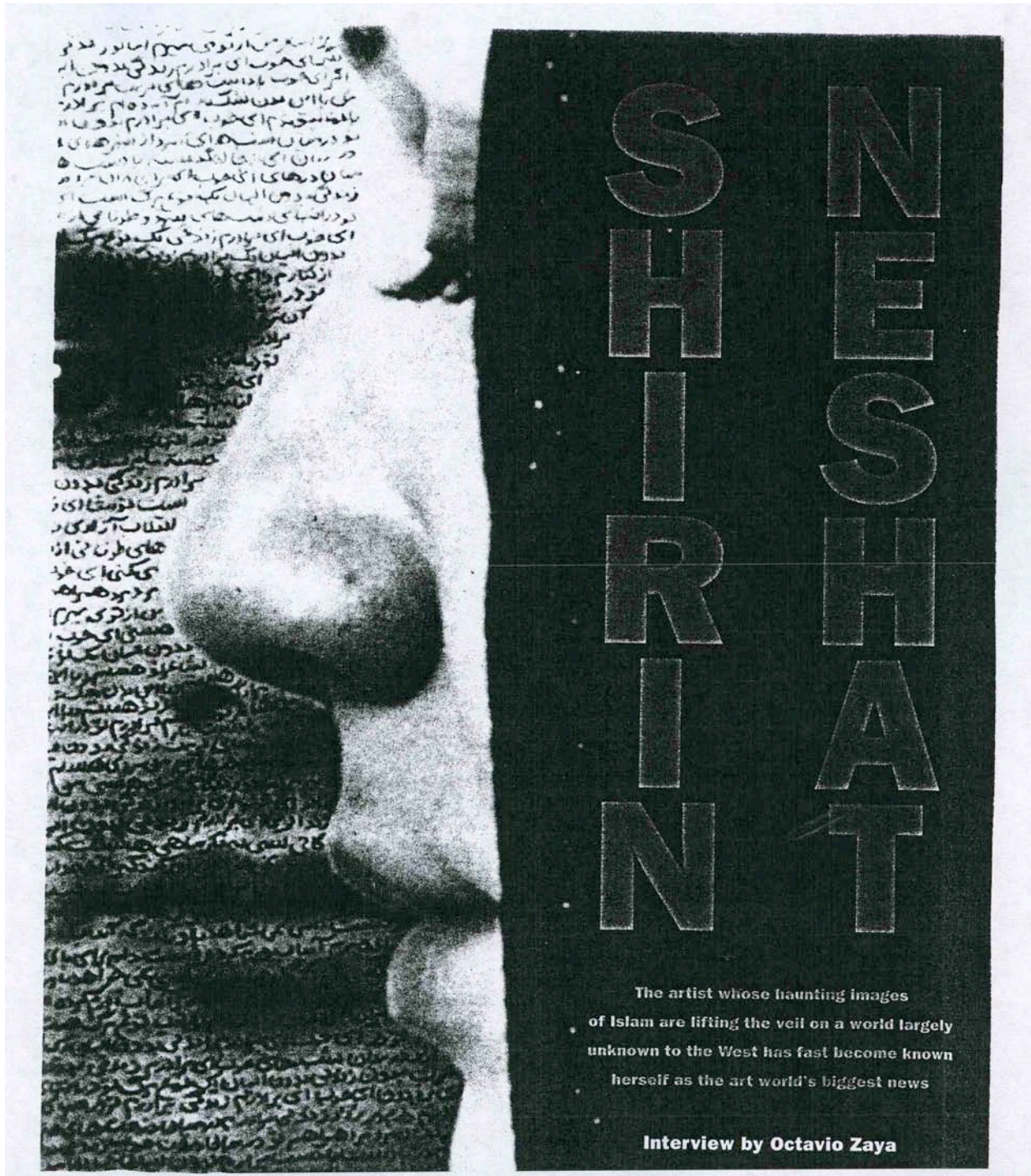


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Zaya, Octavio, "Shirin Neshat," *Interview*, September 1999



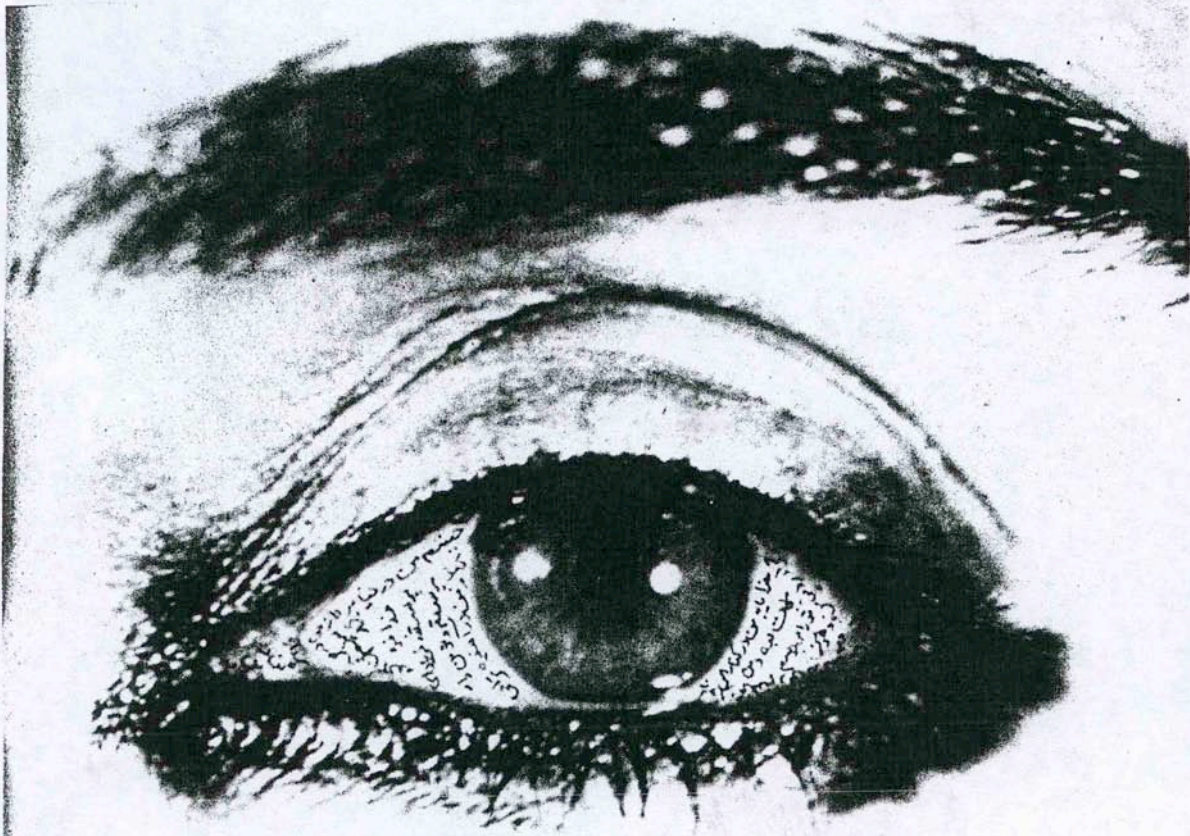
SHIRIN NESHAT

The artist whose haunting images of Islam are lifting the veil on a world largely unknown to the West has fast become known herself as the art world's biggest news

Interview by Octavio Zaya

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OCTAVIO ZAYA: Shirin, lately your work has been getting a lot of attention—first with the photographs of Islamic women dressed in chadors and carrying guns you showed during the last four years, and more recently with the video and photography work you've just shown at The Art Institute of Chicago and with the video work now on view at the Venice Biennale [through November 7], which contrast the situations of Islamic women and men. What can you tell me about your work?

SHIRIN NESHAT: I view my work to date in two parts—the first, the *Women of Allah* series, is mostly photographic and is concerned with the Islamic Revolution in Iran [1978] and the relationship of Iranian women to this subject. This consists of black-and-white photographs I started taking in 1990, immediately following my first visit back to Iran after the revolution [Neshat was born and lived in Iran until the age of seventeen]—an absence of almost twelve years during which time I was living in California. After that first visit I returned to Iran each year, focusing my

work on the life of Iranians and the political and social situation there, both before and since the revolution.

oz: Why Islamic women as your focus?

SN: I found them to be the most potent subject, in terms of how the social and political changes caused by the revolution affected their lives, how they embodied this new ideology, and how they were managing to survive the changes. That they're holding guns speaks to the fact that Islamic women serve in the military, which contradicts the standard Western image of Muslim women and indicates a new complexity to the situation.

oz: For the last few years you've been working in video—to date you've produced four, all of which explore the situation of Islamic women and also, more recently, their relationship with Islamic men.

SN: I started this latest body of work in 1997. The focus is less directly political than the earlier pieces and it strives to be more philosophical and poetic.

oz: Is this tied to your working in video?

SN: With the photographic work, I always found a

danger of falling into didactic imagery. Also, since I was applying text [Farsi calligraphy] over the photos, there often came the problem of translation. However, I found that with film and video work, I can escape such issues. The pieces tend to be freer of reductive conclusions. I can tell a complete story. The recent challenge for me, particularly with the new films *Rapture* and *Turbulent*, has been to create work that, while remaining uncompromisingly authentic to the roots of the subject, do not become too ethnographic and do not alienate those who are not quite informed about the culture. With video I feel like I have finally arrived at a point where the work has become universal in its motive.

oz: Has it been difficult to address the philosophies of a foreign country while living in the U.S.?

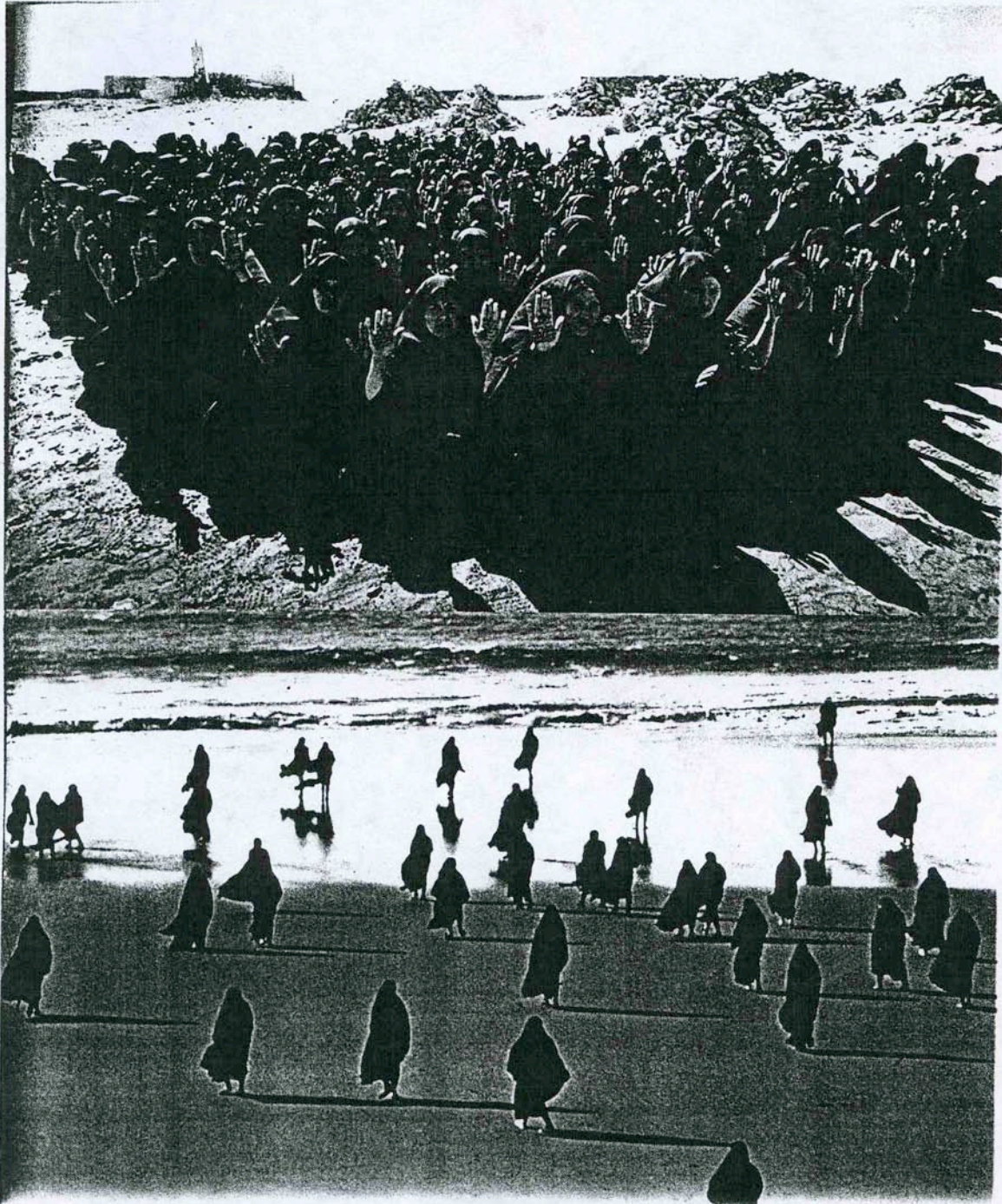
SN: For the past few years I've sort of thrown myself into the culture of Islam, in terms of my lifestyle, my friends, and the people I discuss and develop my work with. I evaluate my work with the community of people around me, people who are much more

Opposite: Shirin Neshat's *Whispers* (1996). Above: A detail of *Offered Eyes* (1993). Both are part of the *Women of Allah* series and are gelatin silver prints with ink, measuring 40" x 60".

INTERVIEW September 1999 165

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Zaya, Octavio, "Shirin Neshat," *Interview*, September 1999



GLADSTONE GALLERY

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knowledgeable than I am. I'm by no means an expert on the area, but I do my homework.

OZ: What are you hoping to say with the work?

SN: I'm really just trying to further the discussion of what life is like in the modern Islamic world. And hopefully doing so in a way that will interest both the people within the culture, as well as those outside of it. What really compels me is the chance to create a dialogue that is rich from any perspective, no matter who the viewer is.

OZ: The work seems to cross parameters of time, as well as of cultures.

SN: I'm interested in juxtaposing the traditional with the modern, but there are other more philosophical aspects that interest me as well—the desire of all human beings to be free, to escape conditioning, be it social, cultural, or political, and how we're trapped by all kinds of iconographies and social codes. I try to combine these elements to convey a sense of human crisis and emotion. One feels surrounded by these kinds of pressures in the Islamic culture. They are not necessarily good or bad, but they are very real Islamic conditions.

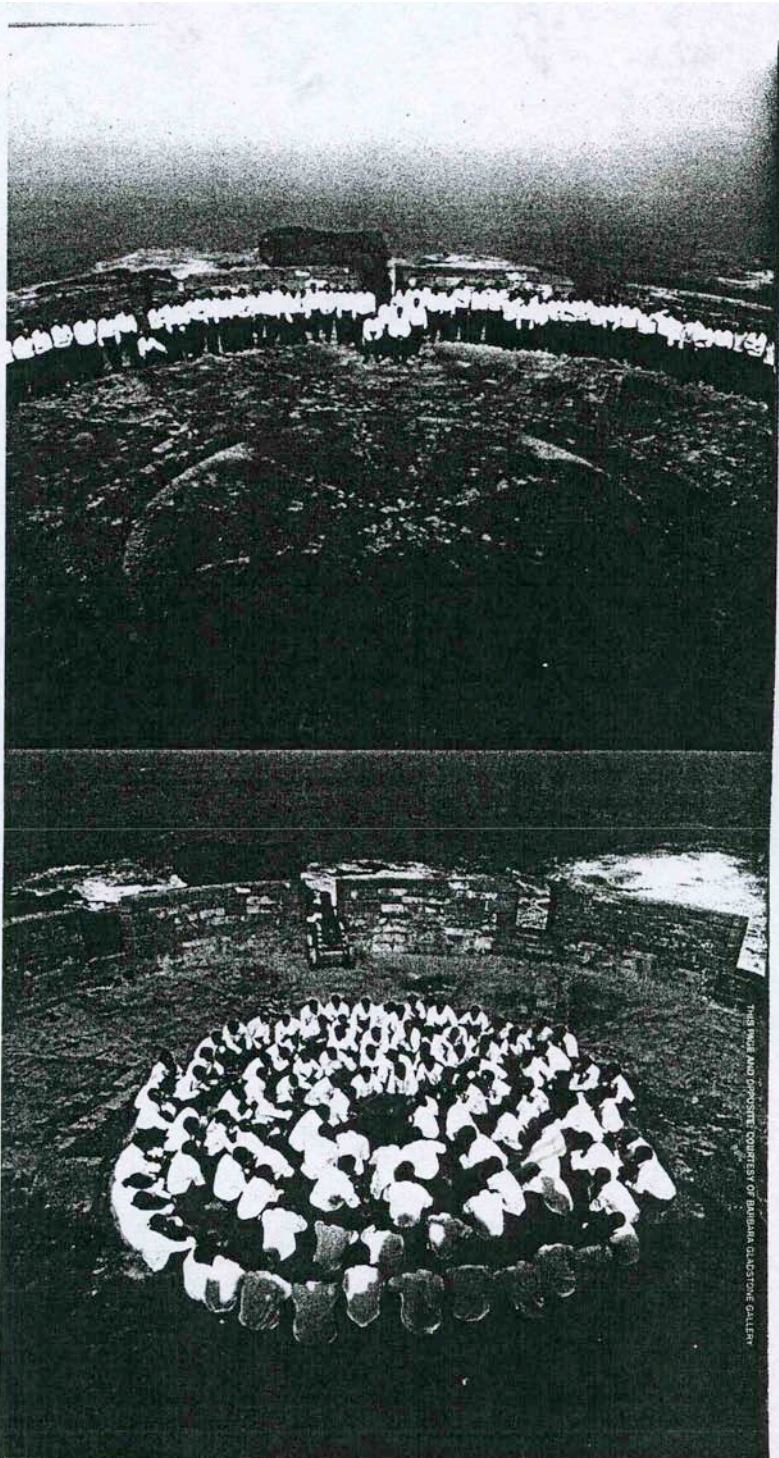
OZ: Lately you've been producing your videos in Turkey and Morocco. Why not Iran?

SN: For a practical reason—it's pretty difficult to get permission to work there. I hope someday Iran will allow people like myself to go in and work—that would be my dream—but it's so difficult. There's always the issue of censorship and what you have to go through to pass all the various codes there. My team is all Iranian, so I think we all hope to go back and work there eventually. But meanwhile I think the experience of working in another country is incredibly enriching in terms of allowing ourselves to enter a new culture and work with people in various other circumstances.

OZ: You're about to set off to do your next project. Can you tell me anything about it?

SN: The general idea is to make a piece that would be partially filmed in Turkey and partially filmed in the United States. The subject will be a kind of conversation—about two opposing cultures facing each other at the end of the millennium, coming to the point where they are questioning globalism and localism. It will attempt to show tradition versus modernity, and lots of opposing similarities. My idea now is to create a story line that involves two women, maybe sisters, one living in the old world, the other in the new. And there would be a narrative that somehow shows their interpersonal lives. The ultimate goal is to examine the experience of separation and reunion, issues of cultural differences and overlapping similarities, and the way technology has started to disintegrate these differences, if indeed they have. So it will go from subtle human emotions to very large global questions. ■

This page and opposite: Stills from Shirin Neshat's 1999 video *Rapture*.



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