

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Zaya, Octavio, "Q+A: Shirin Neshat", Creative Camera, Oct/Nov, 1996.

Octavio Zaya interviews the Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat, whose images explore the paradoxical identity of independent women in revolutionary Islamic societies

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS SHIRIN HAS BEEN CREATING PHOTOGRAPHS WHICH PRESENT THE PARADOXICAL SITUATION OF STRONG AND PROUD WOMEN, PARTICIPATING IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS AND WILLING TO GO TO WAR WITH GUN BARRELS AND RIFLES ACROSS THEIR BLACK CHADORS, AND YET STILL ENDURING THE LAWS OF THE HAREM. SHIRIN'S WORK IS NOT ONLY CRITICAL OF THE AMBIVALENT AND PARADOXICAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN TODAY'S IRAN. IT ALSO CONFRONTS AND DISCLAIMS THE COLONIAL IMAGES OF ISLAMIC WOMEN AS EXOTIC POSSESSIONS, EROTIC OBJECTS AND SUBMISSIVE CREATURES WHICH PERVADE WESTERN FICTIONS – FROM DELACROIX TO MATISSE TO THE WELL-KNOWN WESTERN MEDIA MISREPRESENTATIONS.

Octavio Zaya: What changes did you perceive in the revolutionary process of your country? How are women coping with the situation in Iran? Shirin Neshat: It is difficult for me to speak in absolute terms about the women's situation in Iran today. Every year I come back with new impressions, often contrary to what I had felt the previous years. This may be partially due to the fact that things are constantly changing in Iran, and partially due to my personal experiences as a woman and the conditions I encounter there. But generally speaking, Iranian women seem to divide into two distinct groups; those who are bitterly resentful of the Islamic codes, and others who are living at ease and fully support the Islamic regime. I think living in this constant state of endurance/resistance, acceptance/denial has made these women quite strong. And it is precisely this strength, this notion of 'submission and pride', as you explain it, that I am trying to capture in my photographs.

Last fall, I went to Iran with the idea of photographing a group of women. I wanted to zoom the camera away from the single female character and her personal identity, and to focus on her community – her in relation to others. I worked with a prominent Iranian photographer, Bahman Jallali, who was also artistically active during the time of the Shah. The concept came very naturally to him – not as an abstract experiment, rather as a performance, a chance to act out reality. It was also quite an experience working with the Iranian women models whose lives were the subject of my work. I watched them during the preparation of the photo shoot. They were acting like children, amused by being photographed, giggling and making jokes. Then, as soon as the camera was turned on, they changed, their faces turned solemn, slightly sad. Iranian men and women, caught in a peculiar moment in history, have been stripped of all they once identified with, and have, instead, been injected with a new form of culture called 'Islam'. These women's faces perhaps reiterate the type of cultural crisis and sense of displacement some Iranians are experiencing.

OZ: To what extent do these new pictures you made in Iran try to challenge the narratives of Islamic women which Orientalism helped to

perpetuate in the West? SN: As you know the overall theme of my work has been contemporary realities behind the Islamic population, in particular Islamic women. I deal with stereotypes and identities. Clearly, Muslim countries like Iran, Egypt, Iraq no longer fit the description of the 'orientalists'. Contemporary political implications have altered our fairy-tale image about the Middle East. The same people who were once, by westerners' definition, 'orientals' are now considered 'terrorists'. My photos focus on this paradox. For example, women in 'The Women of Allah' fulfil our typical 'oriental' stereotype: beautiful, exotic, seductive, innocent – yet on the other hand, they are armed, violent, cruel and hateful. This intersection is ambiguous and puzzling and I hope it raises many questions.

The new series of photographs taken in Iran, with women sitting in front of European landscape paintings, speaks about the romantic fascination that Muslims once had for the West and that westerners had for Muslims, and about how these fascinations have been replaced with a new sense of 'unfamiliarity' and alienation. Here human faces elicit what was once beautiful and now is haunting, what was once pleasurable and now is frightening.

OZ: Are you trying to idealise, romanticise or glorify revolutionary violence in any way, or is it a way to make palpable and obvious the paradoxical role of women in Iran and at the same time confront that stereotypical submissive imagery of Islamic women which the West keeps up and pursues? SN: I am interested in making work that opens up the subject about contemporary Islam. And this subject is inseparable from revolutions and violence. My images are about how the Islamic population are portrayed in the world today, and how this portrayal may be a misrepresentation. They are intentionally perplexing and are meant to provoke the viewer to rethink his/her thoughts on the subject. I look at 'violence' that is associated with Islam and try to understand and interpret it. This is not an act of glorification of violence; rather it is an act of communication about the origins and complexities behind the violent behaviour of Muslims.

My portrayal of Islamic women engaged in violence, is not my attempt to promote a 'radical chic', but to speak about a particular feminism that is rooted in Islam. Throughout history Islamic women have fought alongside men in the line of duty, women have shared the responsibility and the cost of being a martyr. One finds a strange juxtaposition between femininity and violence here. My images purposely magnify this paradox. Ultimately the martyr seems to stand at the intersection of love, politics and death. She is committing a crime because she loves God, and this love entails violence ●

Octavio Zaya is the co-Editor of ATLANTICA, a publication from Spain, and a critic based in New York

WOMEN OF ALLAH

Opposite: Untitled. 1996
Following pages: (left) Faceless. 1994
(right) Grace under Duty. 1994
Following pages: (left) Speechless. 1996
(right) Allegiance with Wakefulness. 1994

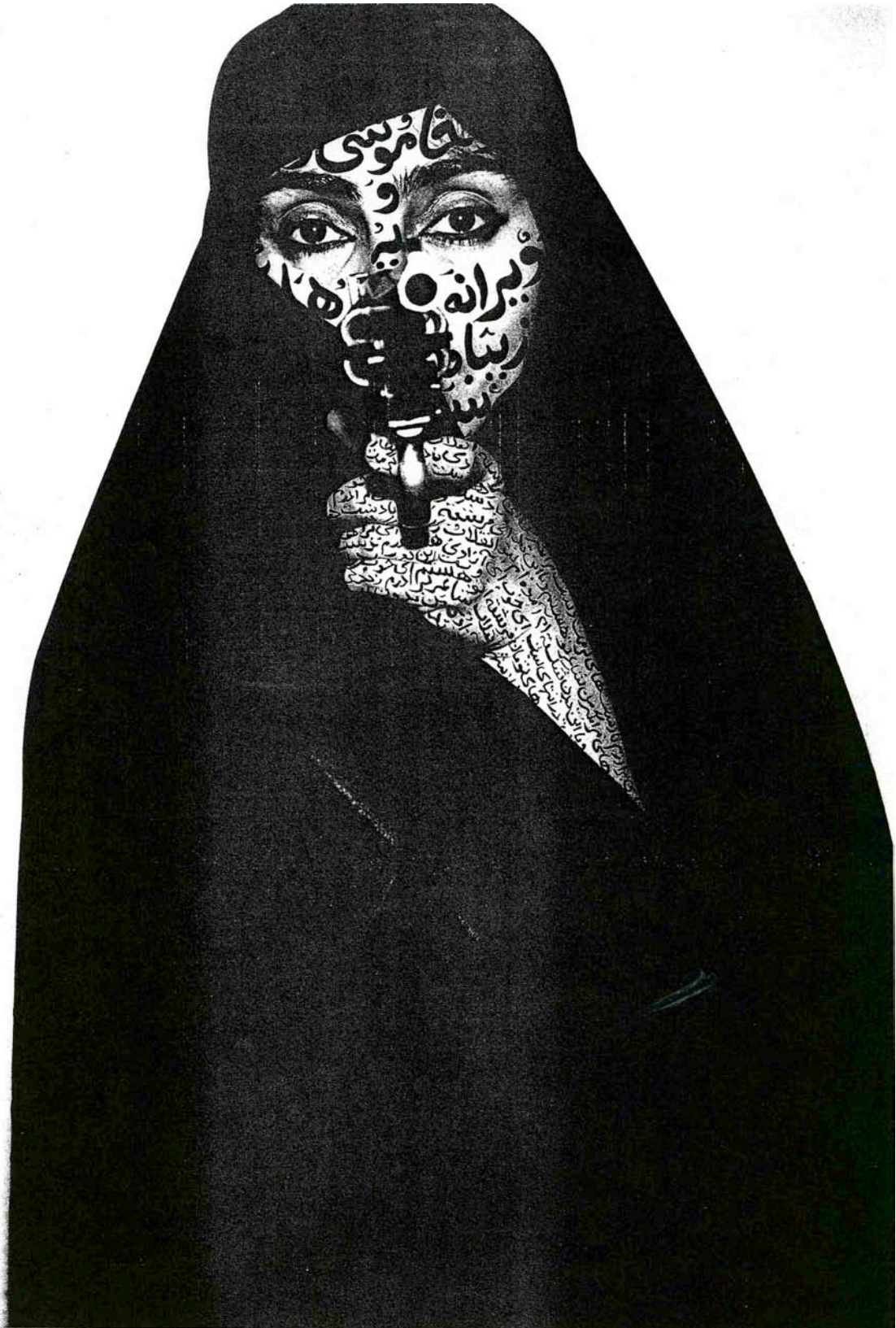
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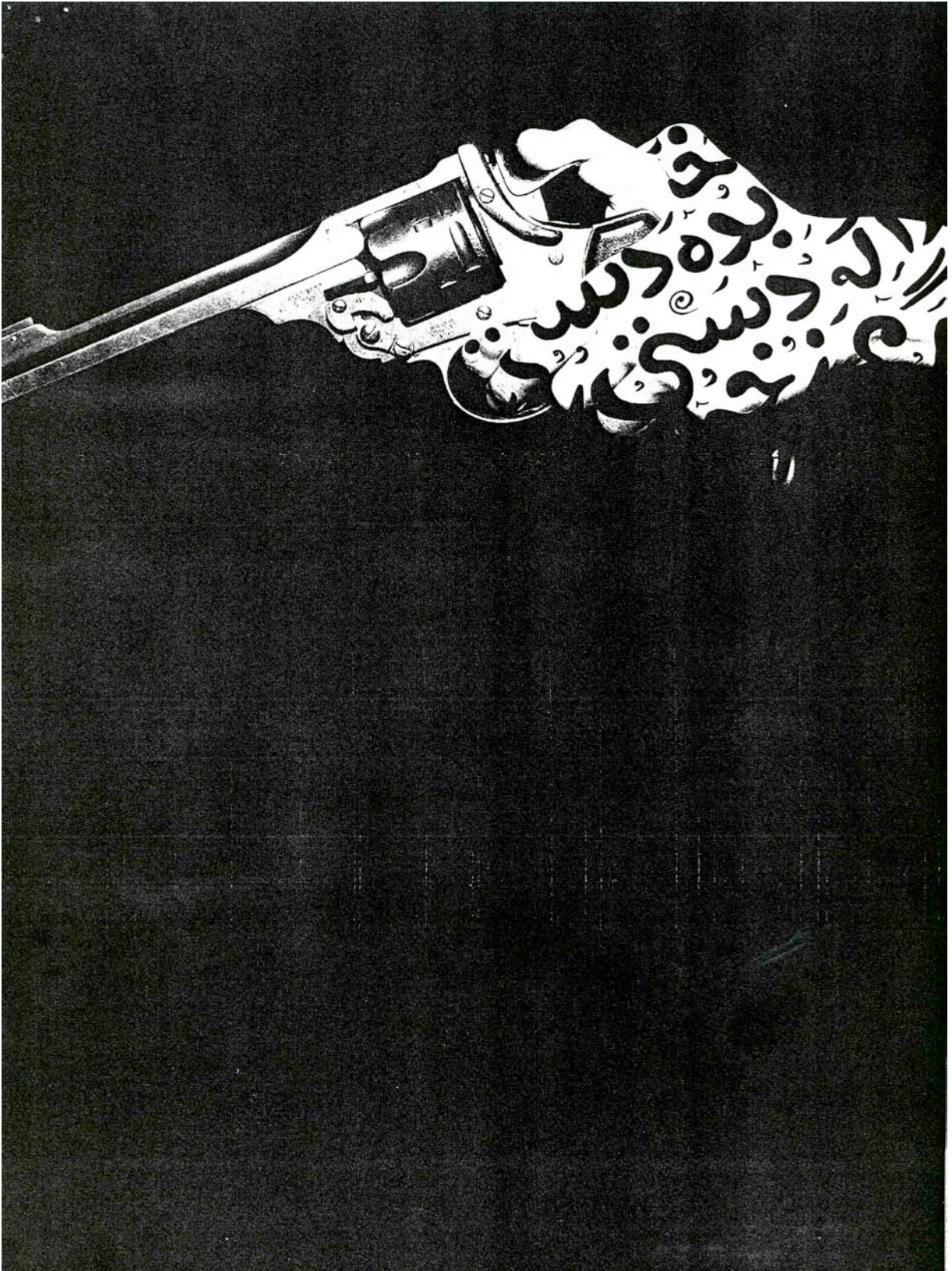
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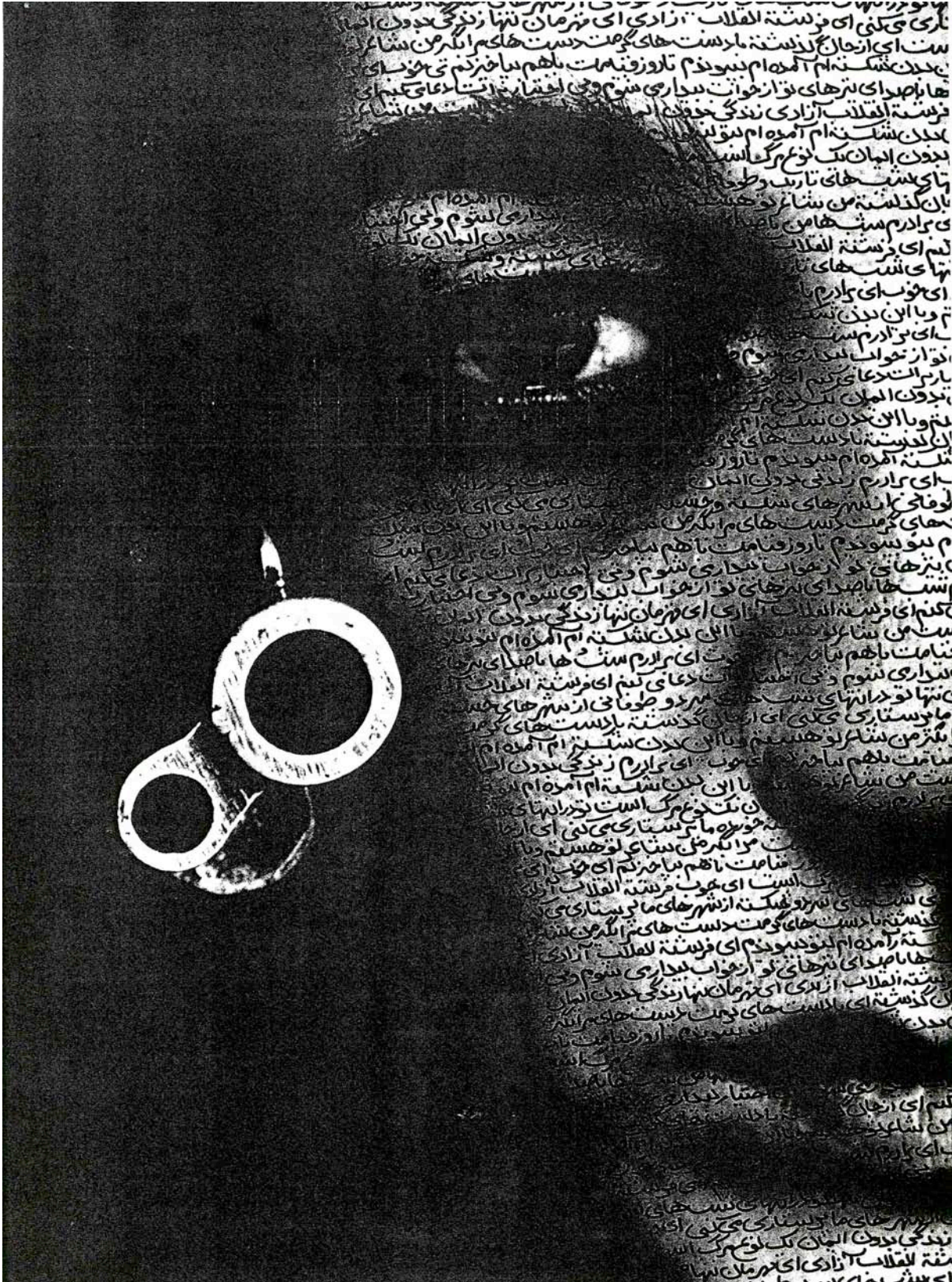
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SHIRIN NESHAT
was born in 1957 and currently lives in New York, working several months each year in her native Iran. She has exhibited widely since 1993 in the USA and Europe. Shirin Neshat was a contributor to Interzones this year in Copenhagen, curated by Octavio Zaya

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BARBARA ESS
was a musician before becoming a photographer. She lives and works in New York. Her pinhole camera images featured at Stills during the Edinburgh International Festival

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AXEL HÜTTE
was born in 1951 in Essen, Germany. He graduated from the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf in 1980 and his documentary projects have been shown and published widely

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JAMES WELLING
was born in Hartford, USA in 1951 and lives in New York. He has been internationally exhibiting since 1976, and has published many books

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SAM TAYLOR-WOOD
was born in 1967 and graduated from Goldsmiths College London in 1990. She has contributed to various group exhibitions and has shown solo since 1994