

Projects 70 : banners (cycle 1) : Shirin Neshat, Simon Patterson, Xu Bing : the Museum of Modern Art New York, November 22, 1999-May 1, 2000)

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70

shirin neshat

simon patterson

xu bing

projects

The Museum of Modern Art
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The white cube is not the only space art can inhabit. Why not migrate off site, climb up the facade, and infiltrate a zone ordinarily reserved for the red, black, and white banners on which the Museum's logo appears? This exclusive territory, branded MoMA, is precisely the area that **Shirin Neshat**, **Simon Patterson**, and **Xu Bing** have taken over with banners they have been commissioned to design. With the interruption of business as usual comes another reversal of expectations: the art remains visible only from the street and viewing it is free. Pedestrians on Fifty-third Street look up!

If banners were gendered they would be male. Victoriously they flaunt images of leaders, display corporate logos, announce events, and they do it all in the public domain. **Shirin Neshat's**, on the other hand, indubitably speaks for the opposite sex. In her vocabulary, banner and chador, a Farsi word for the head-to-toe veil worn by many Muslim women in public, have become synonymous. The dynamics of gender remain central in the work of this Iranian-born artist. For the current project a 1993 self-portrait, one of the first photographs she ever made, served as the model.

As with Cindy Sherman, who points the camera to a self that is not entirely or necessarily herself, Neshat, when she appears in her photographs and videos, poses veiled. Unlike Sherman, however, Neshat assumes conflicting roles within the same image, thus creating symbolic portraits encoded with diametrically opposed systems of meaning that need to be deciphered. Make-up and chador form two of the components. These are potent symbols in Iran. First, the veil and, more recently, make-up have been used as weapons of resistance. These ingredients mix like chemicals in a Molotov cocktail, for each carries associations with different histories, cultures, and regimes. Into this potion Neshat stirs yet another provocative element: a quotation from Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), who could be considered Iran's foremost feminist poet. Farrokhzad and the veil are a contradiction in terms. Her allegiance was to nature rather than the artifice of social conventions. She lived a transparent life and produced her poetry, the only form of religion she knew, from the early fifties until her tragic death in 1967.¹ Tattooed on the face, obsessively repeated like a prayer, the whirling text is hand-written in blood red, or perhaps lipstick red, by Neshat in her native Farsi. Celebratory, the poem suggests a sensual kinship and intimate communion between author and nature:

I will salute the sun once more
salute the stream that forever ran through me, and
the clouds that were my eternal thoughts

I will salute the pain-stricken growth
of the white poplars
that suffered the dry seasons
at my side

Salute the flocks of black ravens that brought
me the perfume of the gardens of midnight;
and my mother who was my old age
dwelling in the mirror²



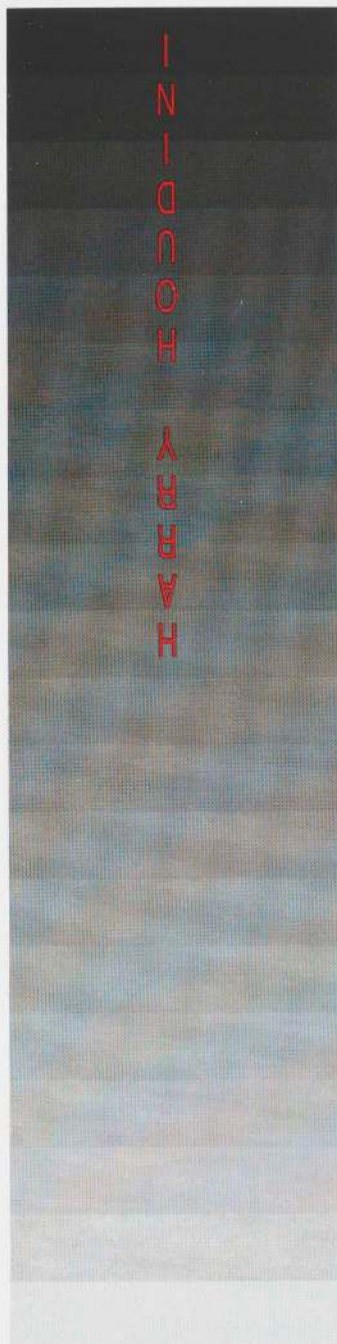
Shirin Neshat. *I Am Its Secret*. 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester, 9 x 36' (274.3 x 1097.3 cm)

But the invocation of the poet's name is not necessarily nostalgia for the secular past—Farrokhzad was not immune to scorn and prejudice. Nor does the veil signal a surrender to fundamentalism. It is too complex to fit neatly into such an equation. Whether it signifies a social class or its militant facet, the dark side of a culture or a spiritual faith, depends on one's point of view.³ In the end, capricious history decides questions of legitimacy. Neshat's presentation is not about political choices. What matters in her juxtaposition is the acknowledgment of the contradictions, the unreconciled dualism women wear and are aware of. In *I Am Its Secret*, the emphasis is on the "I" as well as the eye, the witness. Thus we enter the world of an individual's private testimony that politics avoids.

Targeting a composite persona molded by a divisive Iranian history, not to mention East and West, she communicates her message in enigmatic terms, in a sign language. A priestess, looming large but half eclipsed, she dominates the field with her omnipotent gaze. Such a hieratic image of a sliced figure, almost Egyptian in its iconic frontality, coupled with the sensuous invocations of a shrouded, cosmeticized woman conjure a ceremony both sacred and profane. By staging the conflicting battles within her culture and the

resulting inner frictions on her body, Neshat performs a ritual, an exorcism. Engaged and engaging us in her rite, she leads us behind the surface of manichean certainties and away from preconceptions. Belying its appearance, the message, veiled and layered, is not in black and white.

Body and language are somehow also present in the work of **Simon Patterson**. For his banner this British artist has staged two scenarios featuring the American magician Harry Houdini (1874–1926). Flushed in red, Houdini's name hangs upside down. The elongated and stretched letters mirror a photograph recording the performer, silhouetted against a building and suspended from his feet after one of his publicized stunts.⁴ But this is only one side of the coin, banner, and magician. On the



Simon Patterson. *Untitled*. 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester with appliqué, 9 x 36' (274.3 x 1097.3 cm)

reverse, Patterson hints at the rationalist facet of the gravity-bound Houdini by spelling out the performer's real name, Erich Weiss, and placing it horizontally on the ground.

Just as in his past wall drawings, in which Patterson staged confrontations of Hollywood stars in Western movies—or rather just their names—against a color chart backdrop, the names on this banner perform against a readymade abstraction: the Kodak Gray Scale. But here the abstraction is not a passive background to the narrative. It participates or at least echoes the action of the acrobatic letters and emulates the crescendo ascent of the city's skyscrapers. Black, the heaviest hue of the spectrum, defies gravity when it hovers above the dangling letters, and, on the reverse side, it falls to the bottom, becoming the ground beneath Erich Weiss's feet.

The Gray Scale references color through its gradation of hues extending from black to white. In addition, it carries associations with photography and motion pictures. Thus, in Patterson's acting game, the Kodak chart substitutes for painting, film, photography and, because of its leveled gradation, even architecture. Combined with the gymnastic letters this artist's show operates on two levels: the physical and the conceptual.

Patterson's homage to Houdini may be traced back to a series of works called "name paintings" (1987–98), in which he combined the deadpan look of On Kawara's composition with Andy Warhol's interest in portraying celebrities. More specifically, in 1989 he silkscreened Houdini's name in the center of a white canvas leaving the rest to one's memory and imagination. But now he has left the static lettering behind. Rather, his typographic surrogates, in mimicking physical actions, recall Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "Parole in libertà" and Guillaume Apollinaire's "Calligrammes," in which the letters of the alphabet are laid out on the page in such a way as to evoke images.

Patterson's fascination with the showman Houdini carries several dimensions. Aside from the age-old identification of artist as entertainer, Patterson and Houdini use tricks in their trades, split



Xu Bing. *Art for the People*. 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester, 9 x 36' (274.3 x 1097.3 cm)

the attention between the visible and the invisible, and disrupt the familiar. Mischief is Patterson's trademark. In his best known work *The Great Bear* (1992), for instance, he removed the names of the stations from the London Underground map and inserted new names, including those of movie stars, saints, philosophers, and other well known personalities. Patterson's sly substitutions break down the rigidity of fixed systems and known truths, and, like Houdini's tactics, expand the world of alternate possibilities.

Above all, Houdini's name signifies escape—escape from handcuffs, jail, and straightjackets. In memory of such feats, in 1990, Patterson spelled Houdini's name backward around a room in a lettering that obliquely extended towards the exit. If not exactly escape, the idea of mobility, transportation, and flight, recur in his work with great frequency. For instance, kites, sails, ships, and cable cars, and of course his London subway map have at one time or another carried his typography. But the idea of escape resonates deeply possibly because the straightjacket Patterson—

as well as other conceptual British artists of his generation—is rejecting is painting, which he views as an antiquated form of expression.

Just as actors defer the action to their stand-ins and stunt men, on Patterson's stage capitalized names take over and perform the athletic feats. The figure escapes, leaving behind the letters. Patterson ultimately endows the visual language, both graphic and abstract, with the ability to act, intervene, subvert, circulate, and spread the word.

"To change the written word," Xu Bing has said "is to strike at the very foundation of a culture."⁵ Initially perceived as Chinese, the characters on Xu's banner resurface as English. In other words, English masquerades as Chinese. Suddenly

unmasked, the text, a combination of a dictum by Mao Tse Tung and a little self-advertisement, makes itself legible. Xu's banner proclaims "Art for the people/Chairman Mao said/Calligraphy by Xu Bing" in English. Bold and loud Beijing meets Chinatown.

This Chinese-born artist unleashes his own cultural revolution with language as his agent provocateur. His strategy is no less subversive than his objective. Reversing the routine of those immigrants who must learn the Latin alphabet when they arrive here, Xu questions the hegemony of English by asking native English speakers to meet him on his terms. It is not Chinese that is being reshaped after the English model but rather it is English that is chopped and stacked up into pseudo-Chinese characters. It is English, but not English. His "New English Calligraphy" is hybrid. Xu, however, is not waving dogmatic slogans with his banner. His agenda, if any, is userfriendly.

Xu comes from a generation of mainland Chinese artists who have lived as he says "ten years of socialist education, ten years of Cultural Revolution, ten years of open door policy, and ten years of living in the West and participating in the contemporary art world."⁶ He immigrated to this country in 1990, and his art is just as complex as his background. Even in Beijing, he challenged the public's lazy habits and expected unsettling revisions of perception. In his well known installation *A Book from the Sky*, completed in 1988, Xu combined his skills as a printmaker with the imported language of installation. With his invented, indecipherable, and non-referential Chinese characters he addressed both ancient and contemporary Chinese culture. In this work religion (scrolls), tradition (books), political discourse (newspapers), and by extension any ideology parading under the authoritative guise of authenticity collapse into incomprehensible, mute verbiage. Highly controversial, the work was first acclaimed



Xu Bing. *Art for the People*. 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester, 9 x 36' (274.3 x 1097.3 cm)

in China as one of the most significant creations by an artist of the so-called New Wave, or '85 Movement. But on the eve of the massacre in Tiananmen Square it came to be perceived as an exercise in futility and was compared to the work of a "ghost pounding the wall."

Undaunted, Xu appropriated the comment as the title of a project even more arduous and seemingly more senseless than his previous installation. This time his target was China's Great Wall. Xu, with a team of workers, rubbed a section of the Wall on sheets of paper which were then assembled as the ghost of the original and exhibited at the Elvehjem Museum of Art (Madison, Wisconsin) as *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.⁷

Xu continues his challenge overseas. After all, his banner brandishes a dictum to a public not necessarily committed to Maoist principles. But characteristically, Xu does so as an act of generosity. When asked if the colors of his banner referred to the red and yellow of the Chinese flag, while not rejecting the association, he said he preferred to think in terms of popular customs. He specifically offered the example of the Chinese spring scrolls⁸—those couplets and well wishes, inscribed on red, that frame the doors, house after house, around the time of the new year. At the break of the new millennium, this is an apt metaphor for Xu's message of reconciliation to a public he believes to be alienated by contemporary art.

These three banners do not advertise coming attractions; they present fully narrated plots. From Neshat's stylized drama to Patterson's public spectacle to Xu's address to the people, each banner announces a distinct event: a ritual, a performance, a masquerade. Each artist has a different story to tell but they all put it in writing.

Fereshteh Daftari



ERICH WEISS

Simon Patterson. Untitled. 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester with appliqué, 9 x 36' (274.3 x 1097.3 cm)

notes

1 For a biography of this poet and filmmaker, see Michael C. Hillmann, *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry* (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press and Mage Publishers, 1987).

2 "I Will Salute the Sun Once More," from a collection of poems titled *Another Birth*. Translation by Salar Abdoh.

3 In her other photographs, by changing the codes and recontextualizing the chador, Neshat allows for the multiple readings the veil elicits. Examining the impossibility of facile interpretations of the veil was also the subject of an installation by Sonia Balassanian, exhibited in *Projects 40: Readymade Identities* (1993).

4 See frontispiece in Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young, eds., *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover, 1953), a book recommended by the artist.

5 Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Chinese Artists Living in the West: Xing Fei, Xu Bing, Longbin Chen, and Zhao Suikang" in *Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China* (New York: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1998), p. 22.

6 Unpublished lecture delivered during the Asia Pacific Triennial in September 1999 at the Queensland Art Gallery, Melbourne.

7 *Three Installations by Xu Bing*. University of Wisconsin, Elvehjem Museum of Art, Madison, November 30, 1991–January 19, 1992.

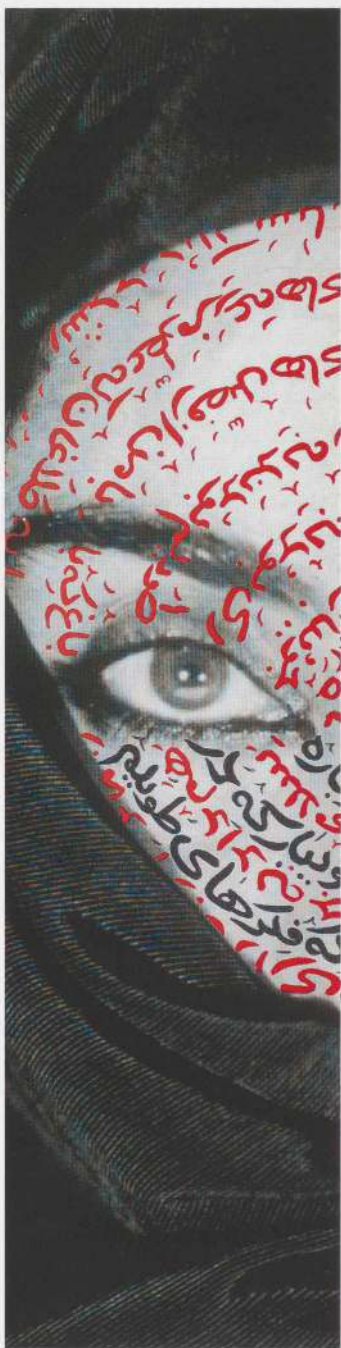
8 Conversation with the artist, October 1999.

The banners are in the collections of the artists.

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