



Art

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## *OverRuled* Performance by Shirin Neshat

by Eleanor Heartney

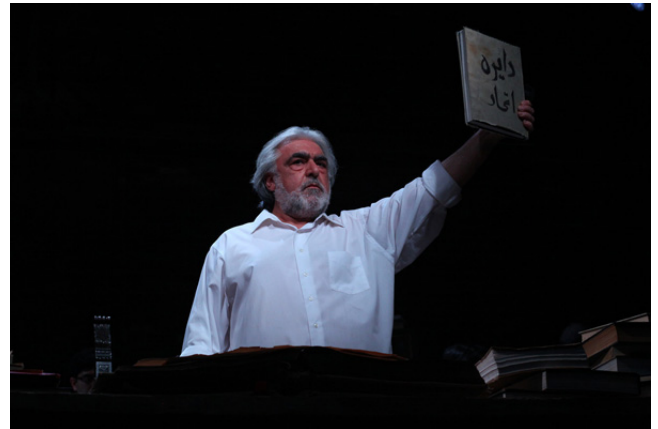
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On a stage above the audience's eye level, men in white shirts murmur discreetly to each other as they page through dusty folios. They rummage through old books strewn on a long table, piled on the floor and stashed haphazardly on shelves. Abruptly they are called to attention by the entrance of a fierce-looking older man with a mane of white hair. After taking his position in front of the table, he calls out a name. Two men and two women rise from the audience and take seats on either side of the central stage. In chairs on two platforms flanking the audience, soldiers bathed in green light strain to hear.

A trial is about to begin.

*OverRuled*, a performance directed by Shirin Neshat and written by her longtime collaborators Shoja Azari and Behrang Azari, harkens back to Neshat's 2003 video *The Last Word*. That earlier work, which featured a very similar stage set and was presided over by a similarly unyielding judge, presents the trial of a woman writer. It was based on the tribulations of Shahrnush Parsipur, an Iranian novelist whose 1989 book *Women Without Men* Neshat adapted for her first feature length film. *The Last Word* uses a real figure to create a meditation on the struggle in contemporary Iran for freedom of expression. The work shifts from dramatic narrative to magic realism at the end when the heroine vanquishes interrogators with a poem and disappears.

In *OverRuled*, the historical source is the 10th century trial of Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj who was convicted of blasphemy and executed by dismemberment. The visual environment in each work is similar, drawing on the stylized vision conjured by Neshat in other video works of an Iran inhabited by



Shirin Neshat, *OverRuled*, 2011. A Performa Commission. Featuring Mohammed Ghaffari. Photo: Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.

black-cloaked women and white-shirted men. However, the messages are subtly different. *The Last Word* is a jeremiad against the censorious authorities of Iran's contemporary theocracy and offers a plea for artistic freedom. *OverRuled* takes on the meaning of spirituality itself. Rather than presenting an opposition between artist and the state, it opposes two views of religion—one hierarchical, authoritarian, and unforgiving and the other sensual, immersive, and grounded in experience rather than law. And while the work ends with a death sentence, it is clear that the defendant has triumphed by spiritually transcending the narrow legalism of the religious court.

The performance unfolds ritualistically. The judge states the charges against the defendant, who is accused of corruption of the youth, while projected images of ecstatic young people play over screens formed by the backs of the white-shirted clerks. The four figures who have been called to the stage make their answers to the charges, each of them representing an aspect of the defendant.

They spar over the nature of God and the role of religion in human life—the judge invokes a fearsome, distant deity who speaks only through his human deputies while the defendant argues for an immanent God who exists in nature, the body, and the senses. Undeterred by the jeering soldiers in the wings, the defendant declares at one point that God and Satan are one—a statement sure to bring on a guilty verdict in this court.

The styles of debate careen between the judge's legalism and the defendant's lapses into poetry. However, the most convincing argument is made by the celebrated Iranian composer and setar player Mohsen Namjoo and singer Shadi Yousefian who, as two aspects of the defendant, use the language of music to demonstrate the liberating potential of sensual beauty. The musical interludes are electrifying, momentarily pacifying even the judge and angry soldiers. The final verdict cannot be deterred, however, and the defendant joyfully offers his or her flesh to the executioners. (It is not irrelevant here that Namjoo himself is in exile, having been sentenced in absentia by an Iranian court for performances that “disrespect religious sanctities.”)

From one perspective, this work offers a contest between the sensuous, individualistic mysticism of Sufism and the fundamentalist version of Islam now prevailing in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic world. However, in the New York context (the work was presented under the auspices of Performa), a larger message surfaces. *OverRuled* argues for the notion of freedom as an internal state which cannot be destroyed by external authorities. This idea resonates in a world where religion reveals an alarming tendency to attach itself to reactionary political forces and to enforce the regulation of behaviors that secular philosophies regard as outside the law. Despite its head-on confrontation with religious authority, *OverRuled* is not a condemnation of religion. Rather, it is a critique of theocracy and



Shirin Neshat, *OverRuled*, 2011. A Performa Commission. Featuring Lanna Joffrey and Kambiz Hosseini. Photo: Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.

of the theocratic inclinations that are evident worldwide today. These are visible not only in Iran, but throughout parts of Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. Nor, as the controversy last year over David Wojnarowicz's video *A Fire in My Belly* reveals, is the United States immune.

The subtle differences between *The Last Word* and *OverRuled* suggest that Neshat is moving beyond the specific critique of Iranian theocracy with which her work is sometimes associated toward a consideration of the dangers of other equally insidious forms of control. Here an episode from Persian history becomes a mirror for tensions within and between various modes of belief in the contemporary world.

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