The 'Artist Genius' Doesn't Have to Go Out and Buy Spaghetti

Shirana Shahbazi in Conversation with Stephanie von Spreter

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Stephanie von Spreter was Artistic Director of Fotogalleriet between 2011 and 2018, and curated Shirana Shahbazi's solo exhibition Group Show For Oslo *at Fotogalleriet in 2017 as part of the institution's fortieth-anniversary programme. For this salon-style presentation Shahbazi, in collaboration with Fotogalleriet, selected over fifty of her works from the 1990s until today, spanning a period of twenty years. Shahbazi and von Spreter met via Zoom in June 2020 to talk about her work and artistic practice.*

Stephanie von Spreter To my mind, unlike the flood of transient images in the media, and on social media, your works constitute a kind of tranquil space. They have something slow about them, something resolute and clear; they don't have any doubts and stand firm in rocky seas. They're independent objects that resist the ephemeral and create their own timeframe.

Shirana Shahbazi You'd think that photo-friendly media like Instagram would be easily accessible to me, yet the question is whether one wants to move in such a public sphere. It's very foreign to me. And as you say: the flood of images has little to do with me. For me, it has much more to do with an encounter with an image, rather than representation. Representations have become codes. My processes are very slow and boring by comparison – the opposite of momentary. Even if the images sometimes have a fleeting feel to them, they're always calm and concentrated as objects. They invite you to tarry a while, and not to leap from one idea to the next.

SVS This was tangible in *Group Show for Oslo*, where individual works were in dialogue with one another, and each photograph was a window to another world.

SHSH At Fotogalleriet, the various different media were exhibited next to one another and filled the space. That adjacency is a kind of collaging. In the more recent pieces, I've gone a step further and thought about how individual works can combine in a single work. In other words, not exhibiting ten individual works, but technically and physically uniting them; anchoring the spa-

tiality, the materiality, the different techniques in the image.

Before the Fotogalleriet exhibition, I had a show at Camera Austria. I'd just parted company with the gallery that had represented me before, and therefore I had a lot of pieces in storage. I'd often thought about a salon-style hang, a space crammed full of images. For Camera Austria, there was this huge exhibition hall, but no production budget. It seemed obvious to take it as an occasion to bring all the works together and to claim that, owing to the confluence between them they all speak of the same thing. The exhibition at Fotogalleriet was, consciously, a successor show to that.

SVS Many of your exhibitions include coloured walls, and these not only constitute a highly contrasting background, but also kindle a dialogue with the other works. Your recent works, especially the lithographs, are displayed in combination with handmade ceramic frames consisting of coloured geometric shapes. The superimposition of the themes of the images and the interaction with the coloured surfaces, both in the lithograph and in the frame, give rise to a composition that metaphorically references other, non-Western forms of modernity.

SHSH I am, of course, familiar with the spatial wealth of colours and materials from Iranian culture. I find such opulence fulfilling, inspiring; it keeps you awake rather than being exhausting. The coloured ceramic frames are a miniature version of the coloured walls. However, when you stand physically in front of them, you notice how inexactly the ceramic has been made, and then the levels of the lithographs, the pictorial surfaces. Behind these you can discern a black and white photograph that's also been collaged and reproduced. This superimposition becomes so complex that historical references take a back seat. The wealth of different opportunities innate in different materials and pictorial languages has always accompanied my work, and then coalesces in individual pieces.

SVS What gave rise to this use of ceramics?

SHSH My decision to work with ceramics was connected to my work with architecture. I frequently create art for a specific building, which often opens a door to using new materials, because I can try out new approaches there, endeavour to create art that stands alone against the architecture. Images often play a subordinate role to spaces. For that reason, I usually try to occupy the space, to foster an atmosphere of my own. In these projects, I try to work with the original construction materials and in a certain sense clothe the rooms. During one project, I came across a ceramic factory in Portugal. This new colourful world fascinated me, as did the tactile aspect of the colour pattern. There are many materials that interest me and that appear in my work in the form of knotted carpets, silkscreens, venetian blinds or wallpaper, or the floor of Zurich Kantonalbank. Even if I don't produce them myself, I'm still always closely involved with the production processes. And that's the case with the ceramics, too.

SVS Some of the photographs that you showed at *Group Show for Oslo* are lithographs that reflect a personal journey. They arose during a three-month trip you made with your family to Iran, your parents' home country. However, the images don't seem like records of private travel moments. They combine, in a very special way, the quality of snapshots with an intrinsically coherent composition, precisely cropped, almost hermetic. Was this a deliberate method to render the personal as something universal?

SHSH I photograph while experiencing things, almost like making sketches or notes. Originally, I considered this kind of photography to be very private and I kept it quite separate from my exhibition activity. These pieces had a quality of their own. I always bound them in small one-off booklets, which never entered professional channels. But on the occasion of my exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern in 2014, the curator Fabrice Stroun saw these booklets and encouraged me to take the road

trip to create work for the exhibition. He was evidently fascinated by the fact that this side to my work had never been shown in public. So I made a three-month-long car ride from Zurich to Iran, and along the way I photographed and photographed and photographed. Back in Zurich, I made a selection of the images and then realised them as bi- or tri-colour lithographs. I've actually always found the notion of a snapshot irritating, because the momentary nature that's intrinsic to these images has nothing to do with that anachronistic process – the action of selecting, of compiling. It's an immensely slow procedure to infuse the work with life. Nevertheless, it was important to me that the works take a step back from photography, because that way they're stripped of a diary-like, personal, private and therefore trivial sense. You actually describe it very accurately: the personal – memories, observations, the transient – is captured, and yet it has something collective about it. One gives it a shape that perfectly manifests this: a specific situation with specific people and yet, a little further removed from me, an open, universal, pictorial situation. I also achieve this through the colours. By reducing things to two or three colours, you rob the images of their temporality and site-specificity, and as a result, they're intimate and yet can be pinpointed neither in time nor place. A poetic space arises as a consequence, which remains possible through the extremely pictorial, almost sculptural quality, and in this way it forges a link between these and my other works.

SVS Something similar occurs in your series *Tehran North*.

SHSH That series also consists of lithographs. They were made at a later date, when driving round Tehran by night in 2015. Now, while it may be possible to identify Tehran – the mood in the streets, the drive round a big city – the photographs nevertheless have something more open about them. These are works that can also be associated with other places.



S V S In preparation for our interview, I spent a little time combing through the literature on your oeuvre. What struck me was that there are very few reviews of your publications. Strange, as the photobook is an important medium. Those of your photobooks that I know best are *Tehran North* and *Monstera*, and both stand out for the fact that the photographs take the foreground, an image opus, whereas the accompanying text is secondary (if it even exists). Today, in commercial and artistic terms, the photobook is experiencing a real renaissance, as can be seen from the countless trade fairs, festivals and prizes devoted to photobooks. At the same time, artists' books and, by extension photobooks, have always constituted a free space for artists, in particular at the beginning of modernism. What's the relationship between this format and your photographs, which are also objects in their own right?



SHSH

The photobook is a marvellous space – not only an independent medium, but also a space where I'm extremely independent. I work almost exclusively with Manuel Krebs, my partner and graphic designer. It's a space that we master well, with parameters that we know and where no one tries to intervene or tell us to do something differently. The photobook has something independent, something intrinsically complete, coherent and enduring about it. The books don't require exhibitions. Even if many are exhibition catalogues, they're never illustrations. The books give us the scope to work independently in space, over and above an exhibition. And financially speaking, book-printing has a different frame. Making photobooks is extremely fulfilling.

One reason why my photobooks don't get reviewed that much is possibly the lack of texts in them. I'm constantly being asked whether I feel some animosity to texts, which isn't the case at all. It's just that with

the books I've made, there was never a point or place for text. Words can often be stronger than images and can be falsely precise. So I find it better to only create a visual space. This doesn't mean that I don't work with text at all. For example, I've made a few beautiful publications with Judith Kuckart and also with Lukas Bärfuss. However, if you want to work with texts and images, then it has to be a real choice where the one supports the other.

SVS Do you have any plans for future photobooks?

SHSH Recently, a graphic designer I know told me that I haven't yet addressed my exploration of spatiality in my books. I'd like to meet that challenge.

SVS Making a book is very different from working on an exhibition. How do you see you relationship to the curator and the institution?

SHSH The role of the curators and my own role always depends on the particular project. At Fotogalleriet, for example, as at Camera Austria, we set out to see how many images we could stuff into the space, and that we did [laughs]! I was pretty well prepared, with a plan for the hang. It would have been impossible to have mastered the project without a plan, to simply have gone for trial and error. I think it's best if you're prepared. At the same time, it's all about teamwork. For me, the resulting interaction is key, even if, in your case and at Camera Austria, the works had already been produced.

At Kunsthalle Bern the curator played a greater role in this respect, because he encouraged me to photograph on the trip to and in Iran, even though he didn't know what the result would be and the enterprise might have come to nothing. Not all curators are confident and open-minded enough to say that it can go belly-up, that it can either turn into a trailblazing exhibition or a disaster, and that the institution will live with whatever happens. I've rarely experienced that kind of emotional support. Fabrice completely had my back, irrespective of where I headed. There was no discussion about who would get the credit as the curator.

There are other curators who feel you're invading their territory and defend their position from the word go. I think they have a problem with authorship.

That said, I've really enjoyed collaborating with curators, particularly the many women among them. It gets interesting when it's not hierarchical, when there hasn't been a power struggle. For me, all interaction pays off, right through to the techniques. That was also the case with you guys at Fotogalleriet. It seems to always be the case when things work out well.

SVS I encountered not only your works for the first time, but you yourself, at the 4th Berlin Biennale in 2006. Shortly after the opening party you gave birth to your first child. Being a mother and keeping the flag flying in the art world is a permanent tightrope act. Yet it's an issue that affects many people. I remember listening to a lecture by the artist Vibeke Tandberg, who talked about the influence being a mother had on her creative output and also on how her work was received. Her work changed with the birth of her children, when she began focusing on the limits set by other circumstances in life. I've rarely encountered an artist who's repeatedly described this process so openly, publicly and fearlessly. However, the #MeToo movement has demonstrated that it's possible to address themes that, for all too long, have been swept under the carpet. What, in your opinion, needs to change in the art world in order for women to be less stigmatised and not forced to give up their work as artists?

SHSH It's a shortcoming that we need to address publicly, in order to be able to formulate demands. In Berlin, I'd applied for a scholarship and by the time I got it, I was pregnant. The institution that awarded the scholarship responded quite harshly to my new situation, along the lines of 'Well, that wasn't really the plan.' And I myself thought, 'This is the end of everything. It's the end of the world.' Or of one world at least, and I thought the two worlds weren't mutually compatible. Surprisingly, it was my Iranian grandmother who asked me what on

earth the scholarship had to do with my pregnancy. Her comment was pretty liberating. It freed me from thinking of stereotypical settings into which a child is born. In Iran, and in many other cultures, people live in larger social structures in which the child doesn't grow up fixated only on one person, and that person needn't even be the mother. In Switzerland, things are harder. Childcare here is a luxury and the dominant idea is that a child's wellbeing depends on it being looked after by its mother, or at least with the father.

As a freelance artist, you need to be very flexible; you're permanently reorganising yourself and establishing a flexible network. There are intense phases, there are quiet phases, there's travel, there are evening events, weekend events. Overall, it's all extremely energy-intensive. But with a certain defiance, it's possible. It's like a mental and emotional state of emergency being an artist and being a mother in parallel. If you're surfing the wave, then you're proud that everything is functioning, and happy about the superpowers that you find when you need them. Sometimes it's great, and young women come up to me and I notice that I'm acting as a role model.

However, at the time of the Berlin Biennale 2006, things were different. There were fewer female artists, gallery-owners and curators with children. It was a bit like the beginning of an era – we were the protagonists of a generation who wanted to define that change. In such a situation, you need to live with a certain strength and resolve. During those moments that aren't so good, it all becomes impossible, and drives you crazy. So I established a certain distance. I withdrew from things and didn't take part in all the social aspects of the art business. Actually, I don't consider it all that necessary, even if I'm not sure whether I'm right or not. Now, I feel that I can talk about the drawbacks of being a woman – overcoming my shyness and saying: 'No, I can't take part in the meeting because of my children.' My ego isn't so all-embracing that I simply trundle through life on my art bulldozer irrespective of what's going on around me.

Often, institutions have no idea that their set-up for supporting the arts is geared only to one particular type of artist, namely the male artist, who's quite simply not in the situation that I'm in. In such circumstances you're defined as an individual who only exists through his (not her) art, meaning not as a person who also has to go to a school meeting. A child who's sick at home doesn't fit the myth of the creative artist. Recently I was invited to take part in a major competition, where we were all given one month to submit a specific project. During that time, you of course have other projects going on, too. Added to which, two of the weeks were during the school holidays. One daughter was turning ten and I wanted to go on a trip with her, and the other one had pneumonia. And then I'm supposed to be able to disappear into my studio, lock myself in there for a month, and pop out again at the end with a great project. That simply can't work. The definition of an artist needs to be updated, because the 'artist genius' doesn't have to go out and buy spaghetti. I always try to talk about these things in a matter-of-fact way, without self-pity. Sometimes, you have the power to be cool and sometimes you don't. But I at least try not to torment myself with a bad conscience, and instead tell myself: 'You did good.' At present, during the Coronavirus pandemic, it's all about keeping the mood upbeat. It'll be exciting to see how the art scene reinvents itself as a consequence.

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Conversations on Photography

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