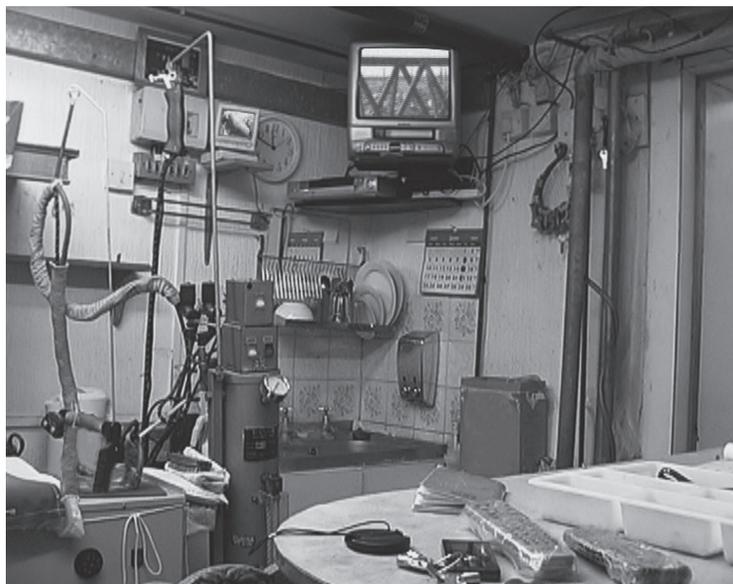


Nooshin Farhid



*Conic Trilogy –
Hyperbola* 2010 video

*Conic Trilogy –
Parabola* 2010 video

Nooshin Farhid's video works, while involving an extremely wide range of sources and subjects, display – according to Olivia Usher – ‘a connecting thread ... a certain kind of agitation, a restlessness, a sense of things not being right’. What was right, however, was that Farhid was among the dozen artists included in the 2006 exhibition ‘Merz=’, curated by Peter Lewis for Bregenz Kunstverein in Austria, from whose catalogue Usher's words are taken. In his essay for the same volume Lewis noted that ‘it is impossible, now ... to believe in the unity of any social perception from a single-point perspective of knowledge ... [the present situation] exchanges the transformation of formal representational systems for the transformation of the means and materials of representation’. Farhid's work, though not directly cited here, seems nonetheless to be perfectly described by it. Her practice not only raises questions about the impossibility of an unproblematic, neutral representation of truth, it aggravates and scrambles the conventional codes of video and filmic construction so as to open up these media to new modes of presentation and, concomitantly, to novel ways of reading the moving image.

If one central strand of the Bregenz exhibition, which revolved around the figure of Kurt Schwitters, was the prevalence of a critical collage aesthetic within modern culture, a second pervasive trope of the show was migration, marginalisation and the loss and subsequent affirmation of value. Farhid, who came to the UK from Iran in 1987, was, like Schwitters, a refugee fleeing for her life, and as such was forced to find liveable meaning through the practical reassertion of selfhood in a society and language not originally her own. Her working method, a kind of ceaseless sifting through fragments culled from film, television and the internet that she then combines with her own original imagery, exemplifies what Roland Barthes notoriously termed the ‘Death of the Author’, where individual works reveal themselves to be ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’. Like Walter Benjamin before him, Barthes realised that rearranging the splinters of already extant objects, languages or cultural codes was no mere instance of repetition but, in fact, the primary way that information-heavy societies renew themselves. For Farhid, such an approach is doubly inflected: on the one hand

her position as one in exile demands she experience western conventions, in all their various manifestations, as fundamentally unfamiliar; on the other, one might suggest that in the multi-layered media society of western capitalism we are all psychologically imprisoned within a plethora of highly contradictory pictorial modes. In this regard, Farhid's marginal position only serves to bring attention to the alienating environment that is multinational capitalism. As Friedrich Nietzsche observed in his now very timely *Untimely Meditations*, 1893, modern culture has turned into its opposite: ‘barbarism, which is a lack of style or a chaotic jumble of all styles’. It is precisely this ‘chaotic jumble’ that serves as Farhid's point of departure for works that function as tools for orientation within the maelstrom of officially sanctioned culture. As Paul Eachus rightly points out in an unpublished paper on Farhid from 2006, she does not make ‘political art but her work is made politically’, an observation that nicely indicates the restrained yet uncompromisingly interrogative approach Farhid employs. In recent years Farhid has exhibited widely both internationally and in the UK, including at the Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam in 2011, Katara Art Center, Qatar in 2011, the Marrakesh Biennale in 2012,

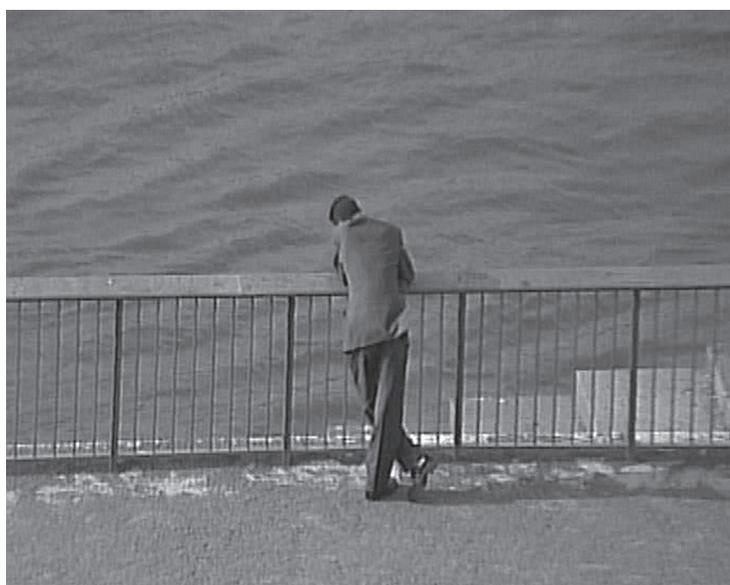
and, in London, at Paradise Row in 2011, Beaconsfield in 2011 and The Agency in 2012.

While many of Farhid's early pieces, such as *The Pigeon*, 2001, and *Sorry, Mr Bond is Dead*, 2002, are montages of near-static shots of isolated figures or records of 'simple' exchanges between two or three subjects, once again more or less fixed in place beneath the indifferent gaze of an indolent mechanical eye, her recent works are highly complicated assemblages of frequently doctored data taken from CCTV, computer screens, radarscopes and sundry readouts from other military hardware. Into this clutch of found material is etched a volatile sequence of bleached and barren landscapes, newsreel extracts and other archival elements, all of which are held together with a calm vocal overlay in which unemotional narrators speak of chronological confusion, domestic complexities or the mind-boggling activities of ants, bees or birds.

In *Conic Trilogy*, 2010, Farhid combines stunningly beautiful imagery of the dilapidated remains of the military and scientific bases located on the Suffolk peninsular of Orford Ness with views through binoculars, telescopes and other media of surveillance and 'scientific' record keeping. She pastes clouds of skittering, shimmering birds over and around closed-circuit shots of badly disturbed men in cells, soldiers in speedboats or wading through mud, exploding planes, demented dust-clouds, and water, lots of water: miniature tidal waves in tatty glass tanks, placid streams, water that is dripping, flailing, enfolding, drowning, drizzling away. The atmosphere is by turns anxious, eerie and utterly calm, though the prevalent mood remains uncanny, so that even when one recalls that Orford Ness is now a demilitarised zone – a sanctuary, even, for endangered birds – the island's horrible history sticks to every image. One is reminded of Robert Smithson's reading of vast industrial remains as being like the intriguing archaeological deposits of ancient civilisations. *Conic Trilogy* refuses the tight ideological niceties of easy-to-read narrative: even the titles of the three sections into which this hour-long work is divided – 'Parabola', 'Hyperbola' and 'Ellipses' – conjure up a sense of a geometric or linguistic reordering of the island's clandestine past, forming a grid or filter imposed by the artist upon what she has found and made. This is not a story or documentary, it is a chain of exploratory fragments, a network of decipherable materials, a cabinet of classified secrets unpacked for close inspection.

Shallow Water, Deep Skin, 2012, looks at the work of the entomologist Shahin Nawai, renowned for her active involvement in the Iranian revolution. In this 31-minute 'portrait', sequences of speeches, battles and insurgent crowds merge with quiet woodland and ranks of massed insects, the latter scattered throughout the entire video, injected, as it were, into every possible corner of the frame. The parallels between cultural and natural paradigms are both emphasised and interrupted in a tour de force of editing, tinting and filtering, and the complex reconfiguring of image, sound and scripted speech.

As much as Farhid's videos are compendia of widely sourced subject matter, they are also object lessons in methods of composition and technical processing. But nothing in the work is fuzzed or overlaid without reason, and much raw footage – from, for example, security cameras or the technology of espionage – is retained untreated, though this only serves to show that Farhid regards 'broadcast quality' imagery as merely one among many possible transmitters of 'the real'. In juxtaposing these ostensibly



conflicting realisms doubt is thrown onto established patterns of representation. The result is a sharpening of perception, a reinvigoration of the media through which we try to understand contemporary culture and, indeed, the received – and sometimes already repackaged – past. This approach recalls that of WG Sebald, in whose writings fact and fiction are in constant danger of cancelling each other out; yet the only serious danger would be to slip into accepting the validity of the 'truth' as conventionally staged. In her subtle, seductive and highly intelligent videos Farhid is not so much concerned with the loss of definitive truth as with finding new ways of recognising the real and its representation as a human-made thing. The work's energetically open form invites the viewer to cautiously and responsibly carry out this task. ■

Nooshin Farhid is exhibiting in 'Politics of Amnesia' at the Café Gallery, London until 15 July, and in 'Mise en Abyme', Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris until 24 July.

PETER SUCHIN is an artist and critic.

*Shallow Water,
Deep Skin* 2012
video

*Sorry, Mr Bond
is dead* 2002
video